

We'll figure it out by Jancys-Blue-Bayou

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Summary: Nancy, Jonathan, New York and a baby.

1. Birth

A/N: This is from a prompt by FallingStar95, who requested a fic where Nancy and Jonathan have a baby.

"Jonathan, some lady called and said that Nancy's in-"

Mr. Chorske doesn't even get a chance to finish the sentence as the youngest photographer on his staff promptly drops everything he holds, the photo of Mayor Koch greeting a child sinking into the chemicals and the tong he held clattering to the ground as the young man runs out of the darkroom, only getting his jacket with him since Paula who worked next to him had the presence of mind to throw it to him.

He's only vaguely aware of his coworkers looking at him as he runs right out of the building and the sounds of cars braking and honking as he runs right through traffic to get to the subway stop that was thankfully close to work. All he could think about were Nancy. And the baby.

"Nancy?" He calls out as he looks around the apartment.

She's not in the kitchen or the living room. Walking back towards the hall he sees that the door to the bathroom is closed but not locked. He knocks before entering. She's sitting on the edge of the tub, staring at the sink.

"Nance? You okay?" He asks, crouching down in front of her and gently putting a hand on her knee. She's shaken out of her thoughts and turns her head to look at him.

"Y-yeah. Um... hi."

"Hey. What's wrong?"

She turns her head towards the sink again and he follows her gaze. There's a stick resting there. Showing two blue stripes. Oh. OH. He looks at her again and she looks back at him, her big blue eyes looking worried and she's got her right hand around her left arm, pulling it close, almost giving

herself a hug, a nervous habit he hasn't seen her do for a long time.

"Oh," he says out loud.

"Yeah..."

He pulls her into a hug and she collapses into him, throwing her arms around him and burying her face in the crook of his neck.

"It's okay. It's gonna be okay," he whispers in her ear while he strokes her hair, even though it feels like the ground shakes beneath him. They've never really talked about kids. They're barely out of college, he thinks, though it's almost two years now.

"I don't know what to do," she chokes out.

"We'll figure it out. We always do."

"I'm going to have to quit my job."

"No. No you're not."

She loves her job. She's great at it. She got a foot in at the Times during an internship and that was all it took, as soon as she graduated she convinced them to hire her. Starting out at the bottom of the ladder she's quickly climbed it, like he knew she would since she's that good of a reporter. She's unstoppable.

"We'll figure it out," he reiterates. "But you're not quitting."

He feels her nod her head a bit. They stay like that for awhile.

He'd wanted to stay home with her as it got closer and closer to the approximate due date, but Nancy had insisted he'd go to work, and she was right of course, they needed the money. The doctor had set a due date for this weekend with the reservation that it could be sooner. And it apparently was. Nancy didn't feel anything new this morning and sent him off, reassuring him that she'd be fine and that Mrs. Rodriguez, their kindly neighbor across the hall, probably would pop by and keep her company as she'd taken to do recently. But these things could happen quickly and now here he was on his way home only hours after he'd left for work.

"And there's your baby," Dr. McKay says and points to the little spot on the screen that looks like a peanut.

"Wow," is all he can answer as he stares at it. Nancy's hand in his, eyes glued to the same screen.

"Yeah, wow," she agrees.

On the subway going back Nancy seems to be in deep thought. Suddenly she looks up at him.

"There's a little person growing inside of me."

"Yep."

"That's pretty freaky."

"Yeah."

"But I'm kind of getting really excited about it.

"Me too."

"You're going to be the best dad in the world."

"How lucky is this kid then since you'll be the best mom ever."

Rushing down the steps and through the turnstile and running along the platform he manages to just catch the train before the doors close. He curses everyone of the stops before the train finally arrive at his. He bursts through the doors and sprints the rest of the way home.

He has sweated through his shirt by the time he bursts through the door of their apartment. He rushes to the living room where he finds Nancy leaning back on the couch with Mrs. Rodriguez next to her.

"Nance! Nancy, what happened is everything okay are you okay did-" He gets out all in one go before her hand on his arm silences him.

"I'm okay, Jonathan," she says and looks deep into his eyes. But then her faces contorts in pain from a contraction. She immediately grips

his hand and he puts his other arm around her.

"You need to get to the hospital," Mrs. Rodriguez says. Jonathan nods.

"We really do," Nancy gets out after the contraction passes.

"How did it go today?" He asks when they settle on the couch.

"Uh... good. I mean I cried in front of my boss but otherwise good."

"Eh... what?"

"I asked Mrs. Lemaire if she had a minute, we went into her office. We talked about the baby and she said she'd hate to see me go. I started bawling. Hormones, I think."

"But-"

"Turned out she meant on maternity leave. She said that she'd miss me when I'm not there and didn't know who to put on my beat while I'm gone. So, yeah. Turns out she really likes me."

"Told you, of course she does. The Times would fall without you."

Nancy rolls her eyes at him and shakes her head.

"Stop..."

"I'm sure of it. And I bet Mrs. Lemaire agrees with me."

"Whatever."

"Anyway um, I've got some news aswell."

"Good news?"

"Yeah. I ran into Leo today and he said again that the door's always open for me at the magazine so I've been thinking... I'll stay at the Post for now but before you go back to work I'll take them up on their offer. Pays the same, I'll get more to do and the hours are flexible so I can be home with the baby too."

"That's great!"

He helps her up from the couch and together with Mrs. Rodriguez gets her down the stairs. Out on the sidewalk he looks around, desperate for a cab since they don't have a car at the moment – his old one is back in Hawkins, because who needs a car in New York City, it's of more use to Will in his senior year of high school back home. But it sure would've come to use now. He hails a cab and it comes to an immediate stop, to his surprise. Looking around he sees that it's because Mrs. Rodriguez promptly walked straight out into the traffic lane and forced it to a stop. He nods a thank you before quickly helping Nancy in the backseat and getting in himself.

"Hey what the hell's going on – oh," the cab driver cuts himself off as he turns around and takes a look at Nancy.

"Hospital. Now!" He orders before turning all his attention to Nancy again.

"Of course, right away! Don't worry, I'm a father of four myself, I'll get you there in no time," the driver replies and speeds off.

"It's early," Nancy notes.

"Just a couple of days, it's fine," he reassures her. And he's really not worried about that point, but he hopes Nancy doesn't notice that he's scared out of his mind anyway, he has to be strong for her, it's all about her.

"Oh yeah, it'll be totally fine, believe me. My oldest daughter Aaliyah was born more than a week early and it all went fine," the driver butts in. Jonathan gives him a nod as Nancy seems somewhat calmed.

Then another contraction hits. Nancy squeezes his hand so tight he's sure her wedding ring makes an imprint on his skin.

"Hurry!" He orders the driver.

"Oh shit," he answers, increasing the speed and rapidly changing lanes to bypass cars. "Get out of the way, I've got a woman in labor here!" He shouts before swerving past another cab that tried to cut him off.

"Jonathan what if I give birth in the cab," Nancy says as the contraction passes.

"You're not giving birth in the cab," Jonathan answers as the cab flies down the avenue.

"But what if I do?" She insists.

"You won't, but if you do we'll figure it out, we always do. Right?"

"Right."

"I got you."

"I know."

He holds her tighter as the driver makes several sharp turns and then suddenly they're right by the entrance of the hospital.

"I don't have enough cash," Jonathan realizes, digging out some crumpled bills.

"For god's sake it doesn't matter, get your lady in there now! Hurry, cabs aren't really allowed to drive up this far!"

"Right, thanks!"

He helps Nancy out of the cab and through the entrance. Another contraction hits just then and they immediately get help and are quickly ushered to a delivery room.

"Jonathan I can't do this!" Nancy screams in the middle of it all as she's got his hand in a vicelike grip and tries to push.

"Yes you can, Nance. You got this, you're so strong. I got you. I got you."

He holds Nancy's hand as she does the most powerful thing he's ever seen her do (and that's saying something). Pushing, screaming and crying and then... for a split-second it's all quiet as Nancy's cries ebb out and then their baby's cries fill the room instead and it's the most wonderful change of sound he's ever heard. He's in a daze, just

staring at their baby, pink and scrunchy-looking in Dr. McKay's arms that he doesn't even hear her asking if he wants to cut the umbilical cord. He's not ready to let go of Nancy anyway so the doctor does it herself. He's shaken out of it as they momentarily take the baby away to get it cleaned up.

And then they place her on Nancy's chest, snugly and cozily wrapped up. She stops crying for a second as Nancy holds her in her arms for the first time. He wraps an arm around Nancy's shoulders and is again completely transfixed.

"Wow," is all Nancy says.

"Yeah," is all he manages. They're both at a loss for words again, just like at that first ultrasound.

"Hi," Nancy says softly as the baby's eyes peer open for a second. He reaches out and the baby grasps one of his fingers firmly. It takes his breath away.

"Does she have a name?" A nurse gently asks.

"I want Barbara. For a middle name," Nancy says one evening when they're sprawled out on the couch together with some Simon and Garfunkel record playing softly in the background.

"Absolutely."

"Do you have any ideas for a first name?"

"Not really. Hey didn't your mom send a book for that?"

"Yeah. Could you go get it? It's on the shelf I think."

He retrieves the book of baby names and hands it to her. She starts flipping through it. Soon an amused expression finds its way over her face.

"Real subtle mom," she explains and angles the book towards him. "She's highlighted all the names she approves of."

"That's kind of sweet."

"Yeah but they all suck. Priscilla? Phyllis?! Come on, mom."

"Yeah, no."

Nancy quickly flips through the whole book and groans.

"Ugh, this doesn't work," she starts. After thinking for a moment she continues: "Hey, start saying cool people."

"What?" He chuckles.

"She needs a cool name, help me out here, I'm trying to think."

"Patti Smith."

"Love her but not huge fan of that name for the baby."

"Kim Gordon from Sonic Youth."

"Hm, Kim. Maybe."

"Kim Deal from the Pixies."

"I get it."

"Debbie Harry."

"Hm, very cool. Maybe."

"Stevie Nicks."

"We can't name her Stevie."

"Joan Jett."

"Joan and Jonathan? I don't know."

"Joni Mitchell."

"Stop."

He smirks at her and she rolls her eyes.

"What's this song called?" She asks after listening to it in silence for awhile.

"For Emily, Whenever I May Find Her."

"It's beautiful."

"Yeah, it is."

"Emily. Hm. I like Emily."

"Me too."

"Emily. Emily Byers."

"Sounds nice."

"Yeah. Huh. Emily. I really like it."

"Emily Barbara Byers," Nancy answers.

"Beautiful name for a beautiful girl," the nurse answers and smiles. She probably says it to everyone, regardless of the name or how the baby looks but Jonathan thinks she sounds really sincere now.

"Do you want to hold her?" Nancy asks.

"Yes."

They shift and the feeling as he holds his daughter in his arms for the first time is indescribable.

"Hey," he whispers to Emily.

He just sits and stares down at her for awhile, at a loss for words. Finally he finds some. It's a cliché but it's also the truth.

"She looks like you," he says softly. He gets no response, glancing over he notices that Nancy's fallen asleep, she must be exhausted.

"Mr. Byers? I'm sorry, but we need to do some tests and such, so if you'd give her to me I'll take her and we'll get those done," the nurse says.

"Oh," he looks up, having kind of forgotten there were other people there. He doesn't ever want to let go of Emily but realizes he has too. "Sure. Thanks, uh...?"

"Rhonda," she fills in with a smile as she carefully takes Emily in her arms.

"Thanks Rhonda. And uh, Jonathan is fine."

"Okay," she smiles.

"Oh," he realizes something. "Uh, phone, is there a phone I can...?"

"Down the hall and to the left."

"Hello?"

"Hey mom."

"Jonathan! Hi sweetie, how are you is everyth-, did it... did the baby...?"

"It did. We have a daughter."

She gives off a squeal right into the receiver.

"Oh my god! I'm so happy! How is she? How's Nancy? Is everyone good, is it all..."

"She's good, she's perfect. Nancy too. She, wow, she was amazing, mom."

"Of course she was, sweetie."

"Yeah. She's beautiful, she looks just like Nancy. They've taken her to get some tests and shots done now while Nancy's resting."

"Good."

"I should get back to Nance. But uh, tell Will and El and the rest and uh, you guys can come out here when it fits you guys' schedule I mean we-"

"Are you kidding, son? As soon as we hang up we're driving to the airport. I'm not waiting around for this!"

"Oh. Right, yeah, of course."

"Do you want me to call the Wheelers for you?"

"Uh, sure, that would be great."

"Okay, I will. Get back to Nancy. See you soon, love you."

"Love you too mom, bye."

She starts dialing the Wheelers number as soon as they hang up but is interrupted. Turning around she sees Will, Jane and Hop all looking at her.

"What was that about?" Will asks, though he's already figured it out.

"Jonathan and Nancy had the baby!" She confirms.

"Really?" Jane giddily asks and Hop gives a small smile that she knows means multitudes coming from him.

"Yes! Now sssch, I'm calling the Wheelers."

"Wheeler residence."

"Hi Holly! It's Joyce Byers, is your mom or dad home?"

"Yes, hang on!" The now pre-teen girl answers and she can hear her shout in the background.

"Joyce?"

"Hi Karen, Jonathan just called. They had the baby!"

"Oh my god! That's wonderful! How is everyone, the baby, Nancy?"

"They're all fine, he said. Healthy baby and Nancy was resting."

"Oh good, good."

"So, we're going to pack some clothes and drive to the airport right away, I don't know about you but I'm not waiting around to see my first granddaughter. Do you guys...?"

"Oh god, me neither! Can we drive up together? I just have to get Ted out of the Lay-Z-Boy and pack real quick."

"Good, we'll stop at your place on our way!"

After talking to his mom he calls work to let them know he won't be in, thankfully Mr. Chorske is an understanding boss and tells him to take his time. A nurse comes by as he hangs up and informs him that they've moved Nancy to another room. She's still sleeping when he walks in so he sits down quietly in the chair next to the bed and just watches her, trying to collect his thoughts somewhat.

Then nurse Rhonda returns with Emily and gives her to him. She's sleeping but starts to stir after a minute so he stands up and starts roaming the room slowly while gently rocking her. Without thinking he starts speaking to her in a low voice.

"Hey. Welcome to the world and all that. We've been waiting for you. It's nice to finally meet you. You look just like your mom. She's amazing. She can teach you how to shoot a gun and how to take down The Man. But that's for later though. She'll protect you. And I promise I'll protect you too. I'll be with you always. Count on me. I'm never ever leaving," he says with determination. Taking a breath he continues in a lighter tone. "And I'm sorry beforehand for how many photos I'm going to take of you but you're amazing. I'll make it up to you in the kitchen, I promise I'll take care of more of the cooking than your mom. It's for the best."

"Hey I've gotten better," a sore voice protests from the bed, making him turn around. Nancy was awake. "And I think she looks like you," she adds.

"Hm," he starts as he makes his way back to her and sits down next to her on the bed. "I can agree with the first part but not with the second, just look at her."

"Agree to disagree?"

"Not a chance, but let's call a truce."

"Okay," she smiles. He carefully hand over Emily to her. Nancy cradles the baby and leans into him as he put an arm around her.

"I called home by the way. And my mom was going to call your mom before she left."

"Left?"

"Yeah I was going to tell her that they could come out here as soon as they had the time but she said she was going now."

Nancy grins and coos with the baby.

The hours pass in quiet harmony. Nancy feeds Emily, who immediately latches on, then they both rest some more and Rhonda comes in regularly to check on Nancy, the delivery had taken a lot out of her but the nurse reassures Jonathan that she'd be fine, they could all stay overnight and get home tomorrow.

In the early evening Nancy's awake again, sitting up next to him in bed with Emily in her arms. Suddenly there's the sound of a lot of voices and footsteps out in the hallway and then the room is suddenly packed with people. His mom, Will, El, Hopper and the whole Wheeler family. His mom weren't kidding when she said she wasn't going to wait around.

"Oh my god," his mom begins, trying to keep her voice somewhat down as she and Mrs. Wheeler lead the way into the room.

"Hi," he and Nancy greet at the same time. "How did you get here so fast?" Nancy gets out, looking bewildered but pleased as both of their families gather around.

"We took Hop's cruiser and he speeded and rang the sirens the whole way to the airport!" Will explains.

"And we followed in the station wagon," Mike adds. "Mom drove like crazy."

"Nothing can stop me from seeing my first granddaughter," Karen states.

"Wow, is that even legal?" Nancy asks, raising her eyebrows at Hopper.

"No not really, but what are they gonna do, put Powell or Callahan in charge? Don't think so."

"Well uh, everyone, meet Emily Barbara Byers," Nancy says, showing off the newborn.

Both of their mothers aswell as Holly, El and Will audibly coos. Mrs. Wheeler is the first to ask to hold Emily and Nancy gently gives her over. Even Mr. Wheeler for once looks emotional as he peers over his wife's shoulder at his first grandchild.

"Karen, may I?" His mom asks after a couple of minutes.

"Sure."

Mrs. Wheeler passes Emily to his mom. She looks as lost for words as he was when he first held her, gently rocking the baby instead.

"She looks like you," his mom smiles at Nancy when she places Emily back in her arms.

"Told you," he gleefully cuts in.

"Hm. I still think she looks like you," Nancy mutters playfully.

Looking up, Nancy spots El who doesn't seem to have taken her eyes off Emily since entering the room.

"El," she gently starts, which makes the teenager look from Emily to Nancy for the first time. "Do you want to hold her?"

"C-can I?" His sister looks amazed at the prospect.

"Of course," Nancy answers. "Come here," she beckons and El steps closer to them.

"Is this right?" El asks as she carefully holds Emily.

"Yeah, that's great," he reassures.

Emily open her eyes and squints at El.

"She likes you," Nancy notes. "Emily, this is your aunt El," she says softly.

"Aunt..." El repeats and looks mesmerized. Mike squeezes her shoulder as he looks at his niece.

"I want to hold her too," Will cuts in and El hands Emily over with the utmost care. Part of him suspects that she used her powers to make absolutely sure they didn't drop Emily.

"I'm your Uncle Will," his brother smiles wide down at Emily. "I can show you how to draw, as soon as you can hold a crayon."

"My turn!" Holly soon announces.

"Okay, come sit here," Nancy says and her younger sister obliges and sits down next to them on the edge of the bed before Will hands Emily over.

"Watch her head," Nancy instructs.

"How are you feeling sweetheart?" Mrs. Wheeler asks.

"Good. Tired," Nancy answers and leans further into the pillows and him.

"We're so happy for you guys," Mr. Wheeler says.

"Thanks."

"Hey I'm her godfather, right?" Mike cuts in, gesturing to Emily who's still in Holly's arms.

"No, you're just her second-best uncle," Nancy teases, looking pointedly at Will, making Will and El laugh and Mike shake his head. "We haven't decided if she's going to have godparents anyway. But

I'm thinking maybe Dustin," Nancy continues.

"What? Why Dustin?" Mike demands to know.

"Eh, he's always been my favorite. And he's smarter than you, I want her to have smart godparents," she continues ribbing her little brother, who rolls his eyes.

Then nurse Rhonda enters the room again.

"Wow, full house in here," she comments. "Real sorry, but visiting hours is actually over now so..."

Their families start getting ready to leave, Holly placing Emily back in Nancy's arms. After everyone's said goodbye to Nancy and Emily he walks them out and lets them know that the three of them will be staying overnight at the hospital. He gives his key to his mom and reminds her of their address and in which closet they can find sleeping bags and such, it might get a bit cramped with eight people in their small apartment but it should be doable.

"And if you see Mrs. Rodriguez who lives across the hall please thank her from us and let her know that everything went great. She was a big help earlier."

"I will," his mom answers and hugs him. "I'm so so happy for you guys."

"This still feels surreal," Nancy says later in bed.

"I know. I can't believe she's here, that we have a daughter."

"Yeah."

"You were amazing."

"You were. I couldn't do any of this without you."

"We can do anything together."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

A/N: Btw there's no particular reasoning for the name, just that I like it. :)

2. Firsts

A/N: An anon on Tumblr sent in an adorable h/c about Jonathan filming Emily taking her first steps, so here's a short chapter 2 on that and a bit more. If you have any prompts or headcanons or other ideas regarding this story or Jancy in general please feel free to hit me up here or on Tumblr (Jancys-Blue-Bayou).

She's so smart. It shouldn't blow his mind considering she is Nancy's offspring and Nancy is the smartest person he knows but it still does. When they were expecting her Nancy had the same approach as for her work or for monster hunting: Research is key. He read some parenting books. Nancy read every parenting book she could find in the Tri-State area. And she told him about them, both the parts she deemed 'interesting' and the stuff she found was 'bullshit'. Nancy made particular notes of statistics on babies development. And was immensely proud when Emily proved to be ahead of the curve in most aspects.

She started talking early. He didn't expect it, it just came suddenly one day. He was at home with her, he'd just fed her and were sitting down in the couch with her. She looked up at him and simply said "Dada". So simple, and yet it floored him. Ironically for a moment he felt like he'd just lost the gift of speech just as his daughter gained it, but he eventually found his voice again. He encouraged her and she repeated it. It continued several times through the afternoon. When he heard Nancy's key in the lock he immediately made his way over to the door with Emily in his arms.

"Hey."

"Hey. What's-" Nancy starts but is interrupted by their daughter who points at him again and repeats her words.

"Oh my god!" Nancy's whole face lights up and she steps towards them.

He points towards Nancy and Emily follows his finger.

"Who's that?" He says. Emily looks from his finger to Nancy who smiles wide down at her.

"Mama," Emily says after a few seconds. Nancy's eyes well up.

"That's right," he says and passes Emily to Nancy who immediately hugs her close.

"Right, I'm mama," Nancy says.

"Mama mama," Emily repeats.

The crawling started early too and soon she had gotten up to such a speed she could be difficult keeping track off. And then the standing up thing started, at first assisted by either him or Nancy. Then she started to pull herself up by supporting herself with the leg of a chair or table. And last week she'd stood on her own two legs. Just for a second before falling down flat on her butt, but it was amazing. So they figured she was getting close to walking aswell which is why they for the last couple of days have tried to encourage her to do just that. She managed one and a half steps before falling over first. Then two steps the next night. Then three.

Which is why he's now sitting on the floor with his video camera a couple of feet away from where Nancy's sitting with Emily, who's standing and playing with Nancy's curls. Nancy grasps the tiny hand that's in her hair and points towards him. Emily turns around and looks towards him with a smile and it's the most beautiful thing in the world.

"Can you walk to daddy?" Nancy asks.

Emily puts her right foot forward. Then her left. One step. Two steps. Three. And then suddenly in a quick succession she wobbles forward. Four steps. Five. Six. Seven and she's there, giggling and reaching out for him and the video camera. Nancy cheers in the background. He laughs and hugs Emily.

"Good job!"

Emily giggles more and puts a hand on the camera lens. He holds it

away from her and gently turns her around.

"Can you walk to mommy?"

Excited by her newfound ability Emily hurriedly wobbles back to Nancy, losing her balance and falling right at the end but Nancy catches her. And he caught it all on tape. He can't wait to make copies and send to both his mom and Mrs. Wheeler.

Nancy declared their daughter a genius the first time she rolled over by herself. He agrees.

3. Photography

It was actually Nancy who'd first gotten Emily a polaroid camera. The little girl was energetic and had a wide range of interests and things she liked to do – he supposed she took after Nancy more than him in that aspect. Apart from all the normal kids playing she also loved to draw (Will's influence, no doubt) and loved to write (a photo he took of Emily sitting in Nancy's lap "helping" her write an article for work was probably his favourite photo of all time). But the thing that she seemed most drawn to was to his great pleasure, photography. She always wanted to see every photo he took and loved to be with him when he photographed. So one day Nancy had picked up a cheap polaroid camera and by god did Emily put it to use. She didn't seem to lose interest in it either, it wasn't just a passing interest it seemed. So he figured he might as well...

"Hey, honey, I got something for you."

"What is it?" The precocious six year old asks, curious.

"Since you like taking pictures so much I think you should have a better camera so you can take even better pictures, so I want you to have this."

He holds out the camera. *The* camera. It was one he didn't use anymore since he'd gotten better ones as the years went along. But it would always hold a special place in his heart.

"Wow... thank you," Emily admires it with wide eyes.

"You're welcome", he says and hangs the strap around her neck. "This takes better pictures than the polaroid camera, but since they are better it takes longer for them to develop. You look through the lens here, if it looks fuzzy you do this," he instructs and shows her, she observes with great concentration. It's actually a repeat lesson since she's already asked and observed how he takes picture several times. "Then you press this button here. Then the picture is on the roll inside. When it's full you tell me and we'll go develop them. Sound good?"

"Yes."

"You know, this is a special camera."

"It is?"

"Yes. So you have to promise you'll be careful with it."

"I promise. Why special?"

"Mommy gave it to me a long time ago. It was the first gift she ever gave me."

"I'll be careful," she nods seriously.

That night as they're laying in bed he tells Nancy that he gave Emily the camera.

"You still have that?!" Her head pokes up in surprise.

"Of course! Thanks again, it's a great camera. Used it all through college and then some, you know. But it was time it got passed on."

"You're too sweet," she says and pecks him on the cheek before resettling herself in the crook of his neck.

The next day is Saturday, their plan to sleep in proves to be a pipedream as Emily bursts into their bedroom bright and early desperate to go out and try out her camera. They can't say no to that of course.

When they're standing in the hall, ready to leave, Emily with her camera around her neck and he with one of his, Nancy looks at them and calls them to a halt. She then quickly disappears before returning with another one of his cameras he has for work.

"You guys look too cute," she declares and snaps a picture of them both. "Hold them up," she instructs and both he and Emily oblige, raising the cameras and looking through the lenses. Nancy snaps off another picture.

They go to Central Park and Emily happily takes picture after picture,

while he takes pictures of Emily taking pictures.

Next Friday it's a halfday at Emily's school because of a teachers conference so he picks her up at lunchtime and brings her back to work with him. She told him earlier in the week that they had to develop so he'd taken the camera with him this morning. It was a slow day at the magazine too, they had just published the latest issue on Wednesday. Everyone was very nice to Emily who proudly informed anyone who'd listen that she was a photographer too, and everyone was mightily impressed.

They go into the darkroom. He lifts her up and sits her down on the counter from where she watches with great interest as he starts to develop. He starts with the roll that was in the camera Nancy used to take the pictures of him and Emily, per Nancy's request (she'd told him last night that she wanted to have a copy of it on her desk at work). Then she begins with Emily's photos. He can't help but think back to all those times in high school when Nancy would be the one sitting there, watching him work during free periods or lunches. Though Nancy would be talking, asking him questions about anything and everything, while Emily sits in quiet concentration while he explains what he's doing.

There's a lot of pictures of trees and flowers and everything else to be found in Central Park, including several shots of a hot dog vendor which is actually pretty good for real. Towards the end of the roll there's pictures she took during the week. One of Mrs. Rodriguez across the hall, smiling (she'd watched Emily for a few hours on Tuesday). Most pictures are slightly out of focus but they're all perfect in their own way because they are Emily's. He tells her so of course. The last photo of the roll surprises him, he had no idea she took it. It shows him and Nancy in the kitchen, laughing about something, he can't remember what, but he do remember the feeling as Nancy collapsed against his chest in a fit of giggles. The framing's not good and the focus is a bit off but she somehow captured them perfectly.

"I think this one is my favourite," he says.

"I remembered what you said," Emily proclaims.

"What?" He asks, curious.

"You said photos say a lot."

"Right," he had said that, months ago. "So what do you think we say in this one?" He asks.

"Happy!"

"I think so too."

4. Gold star

"Mommy, mommy look! I got a gold star!" The six year old runs up to her and calls out, excitedly wielding a piece of paper adorned with a gold star sticker in the top right corner.

"Wow! Good job honey!" She praises her daughter and gives her a kiss. Emily looks immensely proud and grasps her hand as they make their way out of the schoolyard. She suspects that she herself looks perhaps even prouder than her daughter.

She cherished these days, when she could get off work early so she could be the one to pick up Emily. Most days it was Jonathan who had the more flexible schedule.

"What was it about?" She asks, curious, this must've been an assignment they got for the day in class since it wasn't homework. She knew her daughter's homework by heart.

"My Family," Emily reads the heading out loud.

"Wow, I can't wait to read it."

"You're in it!"

"I should hope so!"

Emily giggles and continues. "Teacher said it was very fun to read and that I know my words very well."

"You really do, honey."

"And she said that my family sounded like a nice family."

"Aw, that's nice."

"What did you do today mommy?"

"Oh, like you I did some writing."

"What did you write about?"

"I can show you tomorrow in the paper," she answers. She liked for her daughter to know what she did for a living.

"Okay. Did you get a gold star?"

"Hm, no I didn't! I didn't write as good as you did then!"

"You write good, mommy."

"Thanks sweetie, you too. Hey, do you know what good writers get?" She asks as she spots a familiar place.

"No?"

"Ice cream!" She says, pointing towards the place where they go and get ice cream for special occasions.

"Yay!" Emily calls out and starts to run. They rush to the ice cream parlor hand in hand.

The detour for ice cream times it so they get home to the apartment just after Jonathan who's standing in the hall taking off his jacket when she opens the door.

"Hi daddy!"

"Hey, Peanut!" He bends down and picks up Emily.

"Hi," she leans over and kisses his cheek.

"Did you guys get ice cream?" He asks, wiping away some smudged chocolate from Emily's chin.

"Yes!" Emily answers.

"Without me?" Jonathan jokingly pouts.

"Yes! I'm sorry daddy but you couldn't have."

"Why not?"

"Because it was ice cream for good writers."

"Oh, I'm not a good writer?"

"No silly, you take pictures!" Emily laughs.

"Oh right, I forgot!"

"Show him what you got today, Em!" She encourages. Emily nods and demands to be put down on the floor again. She goes to her little backpack and produces the paper again.

"Look! Gold star!"

"Wow! Great job sweetie!" He praises. Grinning, he looks over to her. "Did you get a gold star for your writing today too?"

"No, but I'm seriously considering suggesting to my boss to establish some kind of sticker system. I think it would boost morale."

"Yeah, how can we be sure you're a great writer if you didn't get a gold star? Did you earn your ice cream?" He teases.

"Mommy writes good!" Emily defends her.

"There you go! And she knows what she's talking about."

"Yeah, you're right honey, mommy writes good too. But can we read what you wrote now?"

"Yes!"

"My Family by Emily Byers

My family is me and my mommy and my daddy. And I have lots of aunts and uncles and grandmas and grandpas. My mommy's name is Nancy. She is old she had a birthday and was 29. She is really smart I ask her questions and she knows answers. She works at New York Times. That is a paper. Her job is writing about things. Sometimes daddy shows me when mommy's name is in the paper that is fun. Mommy writes a lot at home too. Sometimes she lets me help.

My daddy's name is Jonathan. He is old like mommy. My daddy likes to take pictures. It is his job. He takes very many pictures. I like to take

pictures too and mommy says mine is as good as daddy's. Daddy gave me a camera. It is fun to take pictures but it takes long time to see them because daddy has to take them to work and get them out of the camera.

My uncle Mike is mommy's brother. He is old too but not mommy-old. I like when he tells me stories. He knows lots of stories. Sometimes he tells story about mommy that is fun. My aunt Holly is mommy's sister. She is old but not old like mommy and not old like Mike. She is fun she showed me where Mike is ticklish.

My uncle Will is daddy's brother. He is same old as Mike they are best friends like me and Carla is. We draw pictures together. My aunt Jane is my daddy's sister. She is Mike and Will old. Her name is Jane but also El. She and uncle Mike live together. Sometimes mommy and daddy has alone time on weekend then I am with uncle Mike and aunt El it is really fun they have a lot of candy. El and I make Eggo Extravaganza.

I have 2 grandmas and 2 grandpas. Grandma Karen cooks lots of food. Grandpa Ted likes to read the paper. Grandma Joyce always has candy for me that is good. Grandpa Hop is big. Mommy says it is because he has to catch bad guys. He is a police. He gave me a badge I will bring it to show and tell later. It is gold and pointy."

She has the biggest grin on her face by the time she's finished reading it. She glances to Jonathan who mirrors her expression.

"That was great, honey!"

"Yeah, let's put it up on the fridge," Jonathan says.

"Wait, not yet," she stops him, both he and Emily looking confused before she explains. "I have to take it in to work tomorrow to make copies of it so your aunties and uncles and grandparents can read it too!"

The next day she makes four copies of it and uses her lunch to run out and buy stamps and envelopes to send a copy to each of their parents (and Holly), to Mike and El and to Will. To Mike and El she also scribbles a note asking them to *please* watch Emily's sugar intake next time they babysit.

5. A good bad thing

She's working at her desk one afternoon when the phone rings.

"NYT, Nancy Byers," she greets automatically.

"Hello Mrs. Byers, It's Vicky from Mr. Stevenson's office," the female voice on the line begins.

"Yes?" She perks up, listening intently right away. Mr. Stevenson is the principal at Emily's school, Vicky is his secretary.

"We're sorry to be bothering you at work especially with these news but, Emily was in a fight and we need someone to come down here, we've tried calling your husband aswell but-"

"No he's out on assignment today," she replies automatically, Jonathan had told her last night he'd be out of his office, working with Leo on their next cover story today. "What happened?" She continues, urgently.

"Well, I'm not too sure really. Can you come down here?"

"Yes, I'll be right over," she answers and hangs up the phone.

She grabs her things and tells Laura she'll be out and yells some instructions to Jason the intern. It's not a big deal considering the amount of overtime she's pulled in the past. She quickly exits the building and gets on the subway. She's racking her brain, worrying about Emily. There's never been a word of the eight year old fighting before.

Vicky immediately waves her into the principal's office when she marches into the reception. She opens the door to his office where she finds four people. Mr. Stevenson behind his desk. Emily sitting on a chair in front of it, looking sullen. On another chair some feet away sits a boy she don't know the name of, he looks a bit bigger and older than Emily. Behind the boy stands a woman she surmises is his mother. Everyone turns and looks at her when she enters.

Emily has a scratch on her cheek and a scrape on her elbow. The boy

has a bloody nose and a blackeye. Uh-oh. The principal looks exasperated and the other mom looks very upset.

"Hello," she greets everyone before crouching down next to Emily. "Hey Emi. You okay?" She asks in a lower voice. Emily nods and continues looking sullen. "What happened?"

"Well, that's what I'm trying to find out, Mrs. Byers, but it would sure benefit me if Emily here would be a bit more helpful in answering my questions," Mr. Stevenson says.

"I've answered," Emily mutters, looking down.

"I'm afraid 'Chad is a poop-butt' and 'He had it coming' won't do, missy," Mr. Swanson sighs.

She manages to stifle back a smirk at the principal's quoting.

"Well my Chad has told you what happened, he was minding his own business, playing with his friends when she jumped him out of nowhere and started fighting. And he's a good boy who knows not to lie, so I think it's obvious what happened here. If only *some people* could raise their children properly this wouldn't have happened," the other mom says, looking very smug and superior.

"Excuse me?!" She bites back at the other woman, a couple of years older than her. The woman looks at her with thinly veiled disdain. She stares her down.

"Now Mrs. Wellman, please. We've never had any trouble out of Emily before and that was frankly uncalled for," Mr. Stevenson tries to defuse the situation.

Okay, Mrs. Wellman definitely just made her list, but she chooses to ignore her for the moment to instead speak with her daughter.

"Emily," she begins, seeking eye contact with her daughter. "Remember our rules, no lying, okay? Now I need you to tell me the truth. Did you punch Chad?"

"Yes."

"Why did you punch Chad?"

"Because he deserved it."

"Why do you think he deserved it?" She asks gently.

Emily squirms for a second before answering.

"Because he picked on Luis."

She nods. Emily and Luis has been friends for years since the little boy lives just further down the block from them. All three of them are rather fond of the boy, he's nice, kind and imaginative. He sort of reminds her of Will as a young boy in a way. They often have him stay for dinner since both his parents, Carlos and Theresa, whom they've also become friendly with, sometimes work late hours, both pulling double shifts.

"See. I know, and you know, Mr. Stevenson, that my Emily doesn't just fight someone without reason," she says, first glaring at Mrs. Wellman before looking towards Mr. Stevenson. She can see the kid, Chad, squirm in his seat.

"Well," Mr. Stevenson sighs again. "Is that true Chad? Did you pick on Luis?" He asks, nailing the boy with a look.

"I guess," Chad admits in a quiet tone. Mrs. Wellman looks both astounded and personally offended.

"So much for knowing not to lie," she can't help but mutter.

"Well, be that as it may," Mr. Stevenson starts. "Fighting is never the solution Emily, you shouldn't-" he continues but Emily interrupts.

"But he was so mean to Luis! He made fun of him and pushed him over and hit him just because Luis was borrowing my tutu when we were playing Good Witch Bad Witch!"

Oh, so that's why she insisted on having the tutu with her to school. Oh well, it's a really fun game, she's played it with them. Jonathan too.

"Well alright but-" Mr. Stevenson, who very much looks to be counting down the minutes to the weekend, tries to continue but Emily interrupts once again.

"And Luis can't do anything about it because Luis is little and not good at fighting, and daddy says that you shouldn't pick on people and it's special cowards who pick on people who are smaller than them and Chad is much bigger than Luis and me!"

She nods but also admonishes Emily.

"Okay, Em. But it's not nice to interrupt when grownups are talking."

"Right. I'm sorry. Sorry Mr. Stevenson. But that's why I hit Chad."

"Okay," Mr. Stevenson begins yet again, leaning his head against the palm of his hand. "As I was saying, fighting is never the solution, Emily. But you and your dad are right in that it's wrong to pick on people. So you both did wrong. Chad, is everything Emily said true, did you push Luis and hit him?"

"Yes," Chad says with a shrug, refusing to meet anyone's eye.

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know," he shrugs.

She can't help but roll her eyes. Okay, it's Mrs. Wellman that pisses her off most of all but Jesus Christ she's tired of this kid. Of course he knows why he picked on Luis, and the reason infuriates her. But she clamps up since it's probably in hers and Emily's best interests.

"Uh-huh," Mr. Stevenson begins. "Well. I don't think suspensions are necessary. But Emily you will get an hour's worth of detention on Friday, for fighting. And Chad, you'll get two."

"What?!" Mrs. Wellman is incredulous at the sentencing.

"Seems to me he started it, Mrs. Wellman. And frankly it's not the first I hear of Chad picking on other children. I'd suggest young Chad thinks about how he behaves to his schoolfriends in the future because I can assure you that no one likes a bully."

Mrs. Wellman looks to be ready to protest further, but Mr. Stevenson looks at his watch.

"Well, that will be all. And classes just ended for the day so you can all go home. Thanks for coming in."

"Thank you," she says and quickly shakes Mr. Stevenson's hand and glares at Mrs. Wellman one last time before taking Emily's hand and leaving the room.

"I'm sorry for fighting, mommy," Emily says to her while they walk out of the schoolyard.

"Well, Pumpkin. Mr. Stevenson is technically right, and me and your father don't want you getting into fights, you hear? But... I'm proud of you."

"What?" Emily looks up at her with wide eyes.

"Fighting is wrong but standing up for a friend like you did is good."

"So I did a good bad thing?" Emily wonders.

"Kind of. Again, I don't want you getting into fights, but I'm glad you stand up against bullies. Just remember that there are other ways to do it aswell."

"What other wa-" Emily starts to ask before spotting something, or someone and cutting herself off. "Hey, Luis!" She shouts and waves to the small boy who'd been walking, looking forlorn on the sidewalk on the other side. He looks up and sees them and waves back. After looking both ways he then darts over the road to them.

"Hi Emily, hi Mrs. Byers!" He gets out in one breath.

"Hey Luis," she greets warmly.

"What happened, how did it go?" He asks Emily, urgency in his voice.

"I got detention," she shrugs. "But Chad got more," she adds with devilish smirk.

"Really?!" Luis smiles too.

"Yep," Emily confirms and gives him a highfive.

"Awesome!" Luis exclaims, then looks at her. "Mrs. Byers I'm sorry Emily got in trouble for kicking Chad's ass, she did it for me."

"Sweetheart, that's okay. She's already explained it. That Chad seems like a real poop-butt," she says and both kids giggle.

She'd be lying to herself if she wasn't just a little bit proud of her daughter's ability to handle herself in a fight against a bigger boy.

"Luis, are your parents at work?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to come home with us?"

"Yes!"

They make the short walk home and she spends the afternoon playing with the kids and cleaning up a bit in the constant mess of an apartment they live in. She calls Theresa's work to let her know Luis is with them. In the evening she makes them dinner. Parenthood had really forced her to become a better cook. When she moved away from home she could boil an egg and make grilled cheese and that was it. Jonathan had helped her broaden her repertoire somewhat in college after she asked him to, feeling bad that he always did the cooking. They've shared the cooking more now since they have jobs and Emily, though he still does most of it. He excels in the kitchen, plus he actually likes to cook, she still doesn't really, she just tolerates it since it is a necessity.

When Jonathan comes home she ventures out of the kitchen where she's been cleaning up after dinner. Emily comes running out of the living room with Luis in tow at the sound of the key in the lock.

"Hi daddy!"

"Hey Peanut, how was-" Jonathan begins but halts as he looks at Emily, with her scratched cheek. "What happened to you?"

"Chad was mean to Luis so I had to hit him," she explains but it just seems to confuse Jonathan further.

"Hey why don't you go back to playing, I have to talk with your dad for a second," she says.

"Okay!" Emily answers and the kids dart back into the living room. She leads Jonathan into the kitchen.

"So Emily got into a fight at school today."

"A fight?"

"Yes. The principal's office called me and I had to come down. So what happened was some older boy, this Chad, made fun of Luis and pushed him over and hit him, so Emily jumped to his defense. She's fine, she's just got the scratch on her cheek and a scrape on the elbow. The other kid's got a bloody nose and a blackeye..."

"Wow. So what happened?"

"She got an hour's detention on Friday. Chad got two," she can't help but grin.

"Alright. Well, I guess we shouldn't approve of her fighting but..."

"... we do approve of her standing up to bullies."

"Yeah."

"That's what I told her."

"Good. Boy does she take after you," Jonathan smirks.

"Me?"

"Yeah. Standing up for what she think is right, going up against a larger enemy, not caring about her own safety."

"Hmpf. Well the whole winning fist-fights thing definitely comes from you," she pokes him in the chest.

"Fair point," he admits.

"God, you should've seen the look on Chad's mom's face when she found out her angel son got more detention than our kid who we're apparently not raising properly."

"She said that?"

"Yep. She's lucky I didn't have my gun."

"Definitely."

"But she still made my list."

"Your list?"

"Yeah, my list."

"You have a list?"

"Of course."

"Of people who have...?"

"Invoked my wrath and should never feel completely safe again."

"Who's on it?"

"Well, her, that bitch who's head of the PTA, that lady at the park who said I let Emily run riot, the guy who pushed Emily out of his way at the supermarket last Thursday, the guy who threw a beer can at Will and us during Pride last year, Billy Hargrove, Tommy H. and Carol and everyone else who was mean to you in high school, your father, everyone who's ever been associated with Hawkins Lab in any way, shape or form. That's basically it. But I feel like I'm forgetting someone."

"Hm," Jonathan muses and steps forward, taking her in his arms. "The guy who tried to feel you up at your Office Christmas Party?" He suggests.

"Oh yeah! Though I've kind of crossed him off since you punched him and I got him fired. But I suppose if I'd ever run into him again..."

"God you're hot when you're vengeful," he snickers before kissing her. She smiles against his lips.

"How was your day?" She asks when they break apart, staying in his embrace.

"Good. Long, but we got everything we needed. Think it will be a good piece."

"Great," she smiles, kissing him again. "There's leftovers on the stove."

"Great," he mirrors her and kisses her one more time.

"Ew!" Emily suddenly calls out. They pull apart and find Emily and Luis both looking at them.

"Hey Rocky, what's all this I here about you going around punching guys all over New York?" Jonathan teases Emily while he goes to grab some leftovers.

"Daaaaad I just punched one guy and he deserved it!" Emily protests.

"Okay. That better be the truth because your mom and I can't afford to bail you out of jail all the time. And you're too young to become a prize fighter!" He continues while sitting down at the table. She tries to stifle a laugh while sitting down too with a glass of water. Emily and Luis joins them at the table.

"What's a prize fighter?" Emily wonders.

"A boxer," Luis informs her.

"I'm not going to be a boxer, I'm going to be a dancer and a photographer and a detective!" Emily lays out her current plans for the future.

"That's great, honey."

"I'm going to be a pilot!" Luis lets them know.

"That's great too, sweetheart. Will you let us fly for free?"

"Yes!"

"Awesome."

The kids tell Jonathan the tale of their action-packed day while he eats his dinner. Later Theresa comes by and picks up Luis on her way home from work. When she puts Emily to bed she sits down on the edge of her little bed.

"Okay honey, remember what we talked about. Fighting is not good. But defending your friends is good."

"Yes mommy. But what can you do instead of fighting?"

"Well. Use your words, you've always been good with words, you know. Words can defend people too."

"Okay. But... when Chad punches Luis I don't know what to say but I think punching back really worked."

"Hm," she considers what to tell her daughter for a moment. Parenting is tricky, she knows what she's supposed to say but she also doesn't want to bullshit her daughter. Also, even if she tells Emily not to fight, she knows realistically this won't be the end of it. Kids can be horrible and Emily has a strong sense of justice and wants to stand up for herself. She's really proud of her daughter for that. "Okay, I'm going to be honest with you. Parents are supposed to tell their kids not to fight and I would really prefer you not getting into fights, but I know sometimes it's... hard. How about this: If someone is mean to you or your friends, you try to use your words to defend them. If someone starts to fight you or your friends, you can hit back. But never, *never* throw the first punch, okay? You never start trouble, you just defend. Okay?"

"Okay, mommy."

"If we ever hear of you starting fights you'll be in real trouble, okay?"

"Yes, mommy. I won't start, just defend."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Good."

"Did you and daddy ever get into fights?"

"Um... not a lot."

"But you did?"

"That's a story for another time. Go to sleep, Peanut," she says and kisses Emily's forehead. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight mommy."

6. Everything you're not

A/N: OK I will jump a bit back and forth in time depending on the chapter now because I've got a lot of ideas for this series taking place over different times, so it won't play out chronologically this series. But I will always clarify in the beginning of each chapter how old Emily is in it so there's no confusion.

It's two days until Christmas. They arrived back in Hawkins yesterday, as usual going back home for the holidays as soon as they both had time off from work. They were really excited to go back home, they had both been so busy between work and Emily during the autumn they hadn't been able to see any of their family members since August. Lots of phone calls and photographs and tapes had been sent home though, showcasing Emily's progress. The three year old was growing and learning something new each day which made every day so exciting. It was just non stop, and his mom and Will and El were so excited and curious about her every time he called home, and he knew from Nancy that Mrs. Wheeler was the same way.

They got a royal welcome when they arrived, like they always got since Emily was born. He thought of all those times they had gone home for the holidays previously, when they were in college or when they had started working, before they had Emily. His mom and Will, and El and Hopper, had always been so excited to see them of course and asked about everything, and he'd been happy to tell them about how life was. But since Emily it had been taken up a notch, his mom had summed it up to him the first time: "It's just so exciting to see *my baby with a baby!*" And the days they spent at home with everyone was always by far the easiest for them as far as parenting went, since everyone wanted to help and take care of Emily, they barely had to lift a finger.

They tried to split the time between his home and the Wheeler's, though they always somehow ended up spending more time at his mom's house, even though it was a bit cramped with all of them there. But El was always very happy to give up her room aka his old room for him, Nancy and Emily and go bunk with Will since she

loved having Emily around as much as his mom did. And he suspects Hopper (or Jim, he reminds himself. He still thinks of him as Hopper sometimes even though he's been trying to shift to saying Jim like Will and mom does. El says dad.) might be a miracle worker since he somehow managed to squeeze in a tiny bed for Emily in the room for them, by some creative redecorating. And the fact was that it was easier and cozier, and Nancy preferred it, staying there over her own childhood home. More practical since his family was stationary during the holidays, while her parents felt the need to drive out and visit different relatives during the holidays. They went with them sometimes but mostly Nancy liked to claim Emily as an excuse to get out of the visits she deemed boring. And they made sure to spend enough time with Nancy's family anyway since they also adored Emily, so not to exclude them.

Right now it was early evening and they were gathered in the living room, the three of them along with his mom, Will, El and Mike. He had given his mom the latest photos of Emily that he hadn't had the time to send home and they had spent the afternoon playing with Emily. They were waiting for Jim to get off his shift so they could have dinner, his mom was in the kitchen starting to prepare it. Emily runs around playing with El, Will and Mike while he and Nancy sit back on the couch, happy to just watch their daughter loving play time with her aunt and uncles. Suddenly there's a knock on the door. He goes to open it.

He just stares at the man on the threshold first. He hasn't seen him in forever. Since he was a teenager, actually. He never wanted to see him again.

"What the hell are you doing here?" He spits out in a low voice.

"Woah, nice to see you too, son," Lonnie replies, his usual smirk on his face. He reeks of alcohol as always. "I had some business in the area and I thought hey – why not drop by, say hi. It's the h-holidays after all," Lonnie continues, clearly not sober, slurring a bit, but not that drunk since he's got loads of experience with it. He can tell. He can always tell with Lonnie.

"Get the hell out of here, no one wants you here," he growls.

"Jonathan, who is it?" His mom calls from the kitchen.

Lonnie just smirks again. Then some familiar light footsteps comes down the hall.

"Daddy come back and play," Emily says and hugs his leg, looking up at him with wide eyes. He looks down at Emily and changes his expression into a smile for her and puts a protective hand on her head before looking up with a stony expression at Lonnie again.

"Well well, daddy?" Lonnie smirks again, raising an eyebrow at him and looking between him and Emily, who hugs his leg tighter, shy around the stranger. Who will remain a stranger for her, he's determined to keep it that way.

New footsteps and then Nancy is beside him, picking up Emily and looking with detest at Lonnie. He instinctively places him slightly in front of Nancy and Emily.

"Would've been nice to know I have a granddaughter," Lonnie mutters, looking at Emily who turns her head away, burying it into Nancy's neck.

"Nance, could you take her away please," he says in a low voice. She nods but now more footsteps are coming down the hall. He glances back and sees his mom, Will, El and Mike all staring at Lonnie. Nancy turns around and gives Emily to Will.

"Please take her into the other room," she says and looks Will in the eye. Will nods and carries Emily away. El and Mike follow him. His mom remains, standing behind them and looking with utter contempt at Lonnie.

"Get the hell out of here, Lonnie," she spits out.

"Nah-nah-nah, now I want to meet my grandchild," he insists.

"No you won't," Nancy says, staring defiantly at Lonnie. He moves forward and forces Lonnie back from the threshold.

"She's my grandkid, don't I deserve to meet her?"

"No you fucking don't," he growls, standing firm with Nancy at his side out on the porch. His mom lingers in the doorway.

"Get out of here," Nancy is steadfast.

"Look at you," Lonnie smirks and looks at him with that self-satisfied, superior way he has. "You got your little wife and your little kid, think you're all set. I had that too. We're the same, you and me," he continues.

"No we're fucking not," he counters, staring at his father and feeling and thinking more clearly than ever. "I'm everything you're not," he continues, determined.

"That's right," Nancy says and puts a hand on his back. "He's a great husband, a great father, a great *man*. People love him and rely on him, need him. You... no one does. He's the exact opposite of you," she lists off while continuing to look at Lonnie with more contempt than he's ever seen from her (even compared to when they went up against the Lab or the Demogorgon). He thought that it was impossible for him to love her more than he already did, but he's pretty sure his heart just expanded.

Lonnie looks both taken aback and furious. He looks between the two of them, seemingly searching for a comeback or a next move. He thinks to himself that if he takes so much as a step towards Nancy he might actually kill him.

"Fuck off out of here, Lonnie," he says and pushes him away further.

"Jim will be here any minute. He'd be happy to put you in the slammer. At the very least," his mom fills in.

"He's been more of a father to me than you ever were," he nods and looks at Lonnie who's slowly backing away. He mutters something and turns around to walk to his car. They remain on the porch, staring him down all the way and watching him drive off. When Lonnie's car is out of sight he wipes a little at his eyes. The emotion of the whole experience now getting to him, he's tingly through his whole body, the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

Nancy wraps her arms around him and they hug each other tight.

"I love you," she whispers.

"I love you too. More than ever. More than you will ever know," he whispers back.

"I think I know. Think it's pretty much how I feel for you," she counters and hugs him even closer.

They can hear a bunch of footsteps again but doesn't pull apart. But he opens his eyes when he hears Emily and Will holds her out and she immediately clings her little arms around his neck. He reaches out and holds her steady with one arm while keeping the other around Nancy, who likewise steadies Emily with one arm. He presses a kiss to Emily's head and she mumbles nonsense to him which makes him smile. Will wraps his arm around them all and his mom follows suit. Soon he feels El and Mike join in too and he's suddenly in the middle of a group hug, surrounded by people he love. So he tells them.

"I love you guys."

"And we love you," his mom says and everyone agrees, murmuring declarations of love on their own.

"I love you daddy," Emily happily exclaims, seemingly unaware of the serious situation just previously, which makes him very happy.

"I love you too Peanut," he tells her, planting another kiss on her head.

They're all still in the group hug when they hear the familiar sound of a police cruiser pulling up on the driveway.

"I saw Lonnie driving out of here when I was coming in, what happened?" Jim starts as soon as he steps out of his car.

"Nothing, we made him leave," he answers while they slowly pull apart to look at his step-father.

"You alright?" He asks, looking them all over.

"Yes. He won't be back," his mom answers.

"I will get my gun if he ever does," Jim insists.

"Good," he nods. His step-father looks at him and puts a hand on his shoulder, the one not occupied by Emily, or Nancy who won't leave his side. No words are necessary, the action speaks enough for both of them.

"Let's go back inside, it's freezing out here and I should finish dinner," his mom says and they all start heading back inside. He sees his mom and Will both come up to Nancy, saying something which she responds to before hugging them. Then Mike comes up to her, saying something which she nods to before pulling her brother into a hug too. It warms his heart but he's distracted by both Jim and El sidling up to him.

"I'll protect, when you're not here," El says, nodding seriously. "No bad people will come close," she finishes.

"Me too," Jim adds with a nod.

"I know. Thanks," he says and smiles slightly at his step-sister and step-father. He's always inclined to worry about his family, even more since he moved away. But having the chief of police and a girl with superpowers as part of it now... that definitely calms his worries. He knows everyone will be protected even when he's not there.

Great thing about kids is that they take your mind off things. Emily continues to be blissfully unaware of the previous tension which eases everyone's mind. They resume play time while his mom finishes dinner, a smile on her face from hearing Emily's laughter as Jim takes off his big Sheriff's hat and places it over Emily's small head and plays some form of peek-a-boo with her. Emily squeals with delight and he fetches his camera to capture it on film.

He snaps of some more photos, happy to look around the room and seeing his large family. While the others are too busy playing with Emily to notice, Nancy looks up and smiles knowingly at him. He smiles back. When he was young he used to wish that Lonnie would

disappear from their family, and he finally did after years of misery. But he could never dream of having this large happy family instead. It's almost too good to be true, he thinks to himself as he puts down the camera and sits down next to Nancy again. She circles an arm around him and kisses his cheek.

7. The Fixer

He's working from home for the day, bent over some different storyboards he's going over for the magazine when his concentration is broken by a loud cry.

"Daa-aaa-ddy!"

Emily's shout is mixed with sobs and the five year old runs into the room with tears streaming down her face. She's clutching her favorite stuffed animal, a fluffy bunny, tight against her chest.

"H-H-Hopper is hurt!" She cries and holds out the bunny towards him. There's a noticeable tear in a spot where one of its legs meets the body, with some of the stuffing threatening to spill out.

The bunny was a gift from Will. In fact it was the first gift Emily ever received, in a way her first possession in the world. Will had given it to her the day after Emily was born, when they brought her home from the hospital. Which meant he'd had it ready for weeks, both he and Nancy were really touched by that. So the bunny had been there for as long as Emily could remember, when she grew she just grew more attached to it, she took it with her everywhere she went. He and Nancy hadn't given it a name, only referring to it as Fluff-Bunny ("Did you remember to pack Fluff-Bunny?"), feeling it was Emily's job to name it when time came. And when she'd learnt to talk she soon did. Hopper. They still weren't sure how, but Nancy of course has a theory. That Emily overheard them calling his stepfather Hopper, and at the same time Nancy was reading a picture book about a bunny family for Emily, in which the rabbits of course hopped around.

When they first heard Emily call the bunny Hopper they both doubled over laughing. As soon as they had collected themselves Nancy went to the phone and dialed the number to his childhood home while he listened in. It was Will, home from college at RISD on a break, who answered. He burst out laughing as soon as Nancy told him and then they could hear him calling over to Hopper, the real life Hopper, what Emily had named her bunny. Hopper's groan had been loud enough for them to hear over the phone. From then on his dear stepfather was known by Emily as Bunny Grandpa, to

differentiate him from Hopper the Bunny and her other grandpa. He and Nancy both of course referred to the bunny as Hopper too – that was its name after all, and whenever the three of them were visiting back in Hawkins they said Hopper and Bunny Grandpa to avoid confusion. Both Will and El soon joined in, and even his mom, to his stepfather's chagrin.

His heart aches at seeing his daughter so upset. He bends down on one knee in front of her and carefully looks Hopper over.

"It's okay Sweetheart, he can get better," he assures her and wipes away some tears from her face.

"C-c-can he?" She chokes out, looking up at him with wide, wet eyes.

"Yes, I promise, I can fix. May I?"

Emily nods seriously and places Hopper in his hands. He clears away his work stuff from his desk and lays down the bunny on it. Then he gets his sewing kit out of a drawer. He had made sure to get it when he moved away from home. He still remembers the first time it had came to use, during freshman year of college.

"Aw, you ripped the hem of my skirt last night," Nancy notes while sitting up in bed one lazy Sunday morning after a passionate Saturday night, picking the garment up off the floor.

"Oh, crap, I'm sorry," he sits up too and looks over the damage to the skirt she's holding in her hands. "I'm so so sorry," he profusely apologizes.

"It's fine," she shrugs but he can tell from the look on her face that she's a little bit upset.

"You love that skirt," he notes.

"Not as much as you do it seems," she smirks at him.

"That's fair," he answers while blushing. "I can fix it," he offers.

She looks at him quizzically. He goes to his desk drawer and takes out his sewing kit, then sits back down and takes the skirt from her.

"You have a sewing kit?!" She asks in disbelief.

"Yes," he answers while looking over the damage to the hem more closely.

"You know how to sew?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Learned it from my mom," he answers while threading the needle.

"Well, my mom showed me how to sew too, but I never learned."

"I had to."

"Why?"

He's quiet for a second while he begins to repair the damage as the memory comes flooding back to him. The words start to spill out of him as they always do when it's just Nancy there listening. He can tell her anything, he knows. He wants to tell her everything.

"Jonathan!" Will comes running into his room, crying and clutching his favorite stuffed animal, Chester the dog. "Dad destroyed," his five year old brother gets out between sobs. He looks closer at Chester and sees that the stuffed doggy has a big tear along its side. "I-I left him on the floor when I went to get my crayons and dad stepped on him and said I'm not supposed to leave my stuff all over the floor and he tore Chester look!" Will cries.

He feels anger bubble up in his chest. He hates dad when he's like that. Which is all the time, really. Why does Will have to watch where he puts his things? Can't he watch where he's walking? Mom never steps on any of their stuff.

"It's going to be okay," he tries to calm his brother down, putting an arm around him and hugging him.

"No it won't," Will continues to cry.

His mind is racing. Mom could fix this, he's pretty sure. She can fix most things. But she's not home. She's working a double-shift. When she does

that she's not home until well past Will's bedtime. And Will won't be able to go to sleep without Chester, he knows that. So Chester has to be fixed now. So it's up to him, he realizes. He's watched his mom fix stuff many times, sewing up holes in his pants, rips and tears in his sweaters. She had even let him try, letting him help her sew up a tear in one of his most well-worn pairs of jeans. He's pretty sure he can do this. Well, he hopes so at least.

"Come on," he says and tugs Will with him out of his room and into mom and dad's bedroom. He opens the drawer in the dresser where he knows mom keeps the sewing kit and grabs it. Then they go to the kitchen. Dad is passed out in front of the tv with a beer in front of him, as usual.

He puts the sewing kit down on the table and beckons for Chester. Will hands him over, not crying anymore but still looking very worried. It takes a couple of tries but he manages to thread the needle and gets to work. Remembering what mom has told him he looks closely and works slowly and patiently, making a lot of small stitches since it's better than a few big ones. When he think he's done he takes a really close look of his work. Knowing he can't do it any better than that he cuts of the thread and hands Chester back to Will.

"What do you think?"

Will looks over Chester with wide eyes, then gets up from his chair in a hurry and hugs him tight.

"Thank you."

"No problem," he says while huggings his brother back.

Later he helps Will get ready for bed as he does when mom works late. As usual he sits with his little brother for a while telling stories before Will is sufficiently sleepy and dozes off with Chester clutched to his breast. He goes into his own room and reads for a while and does his math homework. He's getting ready for bed himself when mom comes home. He hears her open the door to Will's room first, checking that he's asleep, then she pokes her head inside his room. She looks tired.

"Hey Sweetie, all good?" She asks with one of those smiles she gives him when she looks really exhausted like she can barely muster up the energy

for it but still always does.

"Yep," he answers. "I just did my homework. I'm going to bed."

"That's great Sweetie. Goodnight."

"Night."

It's when he hears her footsteps walk towards the kitchen that he remembers that he forgot to put away her sewing kit. And also when he remembers that he's not allowed to use it when she's not home. Sure enough, soon he hears her footsteps rapidly coming back towards his room.

"Jonathan! I've told you, you aren't allowed to use the sewing kit without me! The needle is really sharp and you could have your eye out and I don't have a lot of thread and we need it for-"

"I'm sorry mommy, I'm sorry but I had to, it was an emergency," he apologizes.

"What emergency?" She challenges.

"Dad tore up Chester and Will was crying and he can't sleep without Chester and I knew you worked until after Will's bedtime so I had to fix it."

His mom's facial expressions softens at his explanation. Then she walks over to his bed and hugs him.

"You're the best big brother in the whole world, Jonathan," she says. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, mommy."

He finishes stitching up Nancy's skirt at the same time as he finishes telling the story. He looks up when he hears a sniffle and to his surprise sees Nancy wiping away tears from her eyes. Then she flings her arms around his neck and hugs him.

"You're the sweetest person in the whole world, Jonathan."

"I don't know," he says while hugging her back.

"Well I know. You are," she says firmly.

He shrugs and hands back the skirt. She looks it over, nods approvingly and tries it on for good measure.

"Still fits," she notes. "Are you sure about photography as your major? Think you should consider transferring to fashion design," she jokes.

Emily stands next to his desk, wringing her hands together nervously and watching with still wet worried eyes while he sews up Hopper with the utmost care. When he's done he hands Hopper back to Emily. She carefully looks him over, then hugs her dear bunny tight. Then she climbs up into his lap and hugs him.

"Thank you thank you thank you daddy, you saved Hopper!"

"No problem, Peanut."

"I love you daddy."

"I love you too Sweetheart."

They hear Nancy's key in the lock and Emily immediately runs out to the hall to greet mommy as usual. He follows.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

"Hey Sweetie," Nancy smiles at Emily running up to her but it disappears when she sees the remnants of tears on Emily's cheeks and her red eyes. "What's wrong?" She asks while picking up their daughter.

"Hopper had accident but daddy saved him, look," Emily tells Nancy and shows her Hopper's stitches.

"Oh, wow, I'm sorry Hopper. But how lucky are we that daddy is great at fixing," Nancy says and smiles at him while she wipes away the remaining tears on Emily's face.

"Yes, daddy can fix everything," Emily nods seriously before clinging her little arms around Nancy's neck, hugging her.

"I know, he really can," she answers before mouthing "No pressure" to him over their daughter's shoulder.

He smiles at her. Nancy sets Emily down on the floor again and takes off her coat before coming over and giving him a quick kiss and a knowing look while stroking his back.

"Well, what else did I miss today?" Nancy then asks and Emily launches in to a dramatic retelling of their day.

8. From mother to mother

"NYT, Nancy Byers," she answers when the phone rings on her desk.

"Hey Nancy, it's El."

"Hey El! How are you?"

"Good. I am in the city today and I was wondering if you want to have lunch?"

"Oh, sure! That'd be great! Should we say... 12:30, at that place on West 29th we were last time?" She suggests, it being close to Penn Station which will be convenient for El, and she remembers that El liked the food there.

"Great. See you then," El answers.

"Awesome, see you soon, bye!"

It was really nice, having Mike and El close by. Her little brother and now sister-in-law (well, sister-in-law twice over, both through her marriage to Jonathan and once again since Mike and El finally tied the knot last summer) were not so little anymore, now being 24 and with jobs and everything. It was upsetting (mostly the fact that little Mikey being 24 must mean she herself is 28 and therefore almost 30 which is just plain wrong, she feels). Just like herself her little brother had been eager to get out of Hawkins as soon as he could. Unlike her he hadn't exactly figured out what he wanted to do with his life by that time though. The look on their father's face when Mike told their parents that he wasn't going to college but would take a gap year to figure things out was priceless.

She had been a good sister and helped defend his choice to their parents, though it was of course a lost cause to try and convince their father that it was a sound choice Mike had made. She personally thought it was great that Mike didn't jump into anything but took his time, though she also thought that he should just go for it and try to make it as a writer already. But he needed to figure that out himself, though she thought he would've by then – seriously, he spent his

entire youth making up epic adventures which were, she had to admit, well-crafted stories, shouldn't he understand that that's what he should continue doing? At least he got out of Hawkins right away, accompanying El who moved to Chicago for culinary school.

That had been a fun development to witness, how the girl who she thought of as a sister long before she became her sister-in-law went from being obsessed with Eggos and only Eggos to discovering a range of different flavors and foods and finding she liked it. After that El was extremely eager to try new things and soon her curious mind went into the direction of making tasty things herself – at which point their mother entered. Her mom had tried and tried again with her, trying to get her interested in cooking and making things in the kitchen but she had never been into it, it just wasn't her thing. Her mom had finally given up after that time she almost set the house on fire when she was 14. So when El showed an interest she was happy for both her and especially her mother, who finally had someone to pass on her knowledge to since Holly was still too young.

Plus it had always been fun to see the look on Mike's face when his girlfriend came over to their house and immediately went into the kitchen with their mom instead of down the basement with him. Another bonus of her mom teaching El was that it meant El didn't ask Jonathan to do it as much. Jonathan of course showed her anything she asked and she loved watching her then-boyfriend-now-husband cook breakfast with his step-sister, but it had been their senior year and she was also selfish enough to prefer to have Jonathan to herself as much as she could with the then lingering worry in the back of their minds that they might be separated the next year (god, she still vividly remembered the elation when they got their admissions back and found out that they both were heading to New York).

So while El went to school Mike had worked various odd jobs to afford his half of the rent of the small one bedroom apartment they shared. When they were teenagers Mike and Will had made a comic book together just for fun, Mike writing and Will drawing. They had been so secretive about it but eventually showed it to their friends. Mike still didn't want to show it to her but Will showed it to Jonathan and of course she got hold of it that way. And she had to admit it was damn good, not just Will's art but also Mike's writing. It

was obviously somewhat inspired by actual events that had befallen them, and damnit if she didn't think she recognized both herself and Jonathan in a pair of characters...

So she told him, that it was good and he mumbled a thanks and spoke no more of it. Vehemently denied any likeness of his characters to actual people. Some of the art Will made for the comic book along with other stuff he had done even got him a scholarship to RISD, Rhode Island School of Design where he went off to right after high school, at the same time as Mike and El moved to Chicago. It was a while later that El had told her that Mike "writes lots of stuff but don't show it to anyone but me". So she had ever so casually (okay not so casually) mentioned that creative writing courses sound really fun and hey why not doing something with that comic book? Through more nudging by El Mike had finally admitted out loud that he really likes to write and applied for courses at Northwestern, and gotten in, obviously, since he had almost (which she was very particular about, *almost*) as good grades and SAT score as she had.

While they both studied at their separate schools Mike and Will also kept working on improving upon and expanding on the comic book they had done in high school whenever they had the time, faxing pages back and forth. It took a long time but then one day she and Jonathan got a package containing a new long draft of it with one note attached reading "So since you write for a living and all could you maybe read through this and tell me if it's good? If it's bad don't say anything, just throw it out and burn it. The usual amount of love, Mike." And another note from Will reading "Hey I think this is pretty good, Mike's expansion of the story is awesome, what do you think of the art? Mike says he likes it but I don't know if I can trust his taste since he thinks what he's written is garbage when it's really gold. Love, Will."

She and Jonathan poured over the draft together and were both captivated.

"Hang on," he halted her when she tried to turn a page.

"Read faster!" She demanded and jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

As soon as they were done she grabbed the phone and called Mike.

"For god's sake will you stop being such a modest asshat and just realize that you are a great fucking writer already?!" She shouted into the receiver.

"Nice to hear from you too, sis," he answered after a beat.

"Mike!"

"So you read it?"

"Yes! We both did, it's amazing, the art, the story, how you tell it."

"... thank you."

"You guys need to send this to publishers."

"I don't know..." Mike hesitated and she rolled her eyes. She could hear El saying something in the background and Mike answering her.

"Is El there?" She demanded.

"Yes?"

"Let me talk to her instead."

"What? Why?"

"Because she's better to talk too that's why! Hand it over."

Mike sighed and then there was some shuffling as the receiver changed hands.

"Hello?"

"El hey, you've read it right?"

"Yes. It's awesome. I told him."

"Yes it is, I told him too. They can definitely get this published but he's being a modest shy ass about it so I need you to back me up here, we have to get through to him."

"Yes. I will help."

"Good. Make him realize it's great and what needs to be done. Use any means necessary."

"Yes."

"Seriously any. Don't be above psychological warfare."

"Um... okay?"

"Withhold sex if necessary."

"Uh..."

"Are you opposed to using your powers against Mike?"

"Yes!"

"Hm, I wouldn't be if I were you, he can be an ass. But okay."

They soon managed to convince Mike that they should send it to publishers and she got the pleasure of telling him "I told you so" when it was picked up. She also told him she was proud of him. The comic book was a hit and became something of a bestseller, in its genre, and suddenly Mike and Will had a foot in the business even before they were out of college. Now several years later they had expanded upon the original book into a series as well as working on other projects, both separate and together. Will had moved in from Rhode Island to New York after graduation and lived not far from them in Brooklyn. Mike and El had moved around a bit depending on El's work, they had lived in Chicago, back in Hawkins again for a short while, then closer to Indianapolis but had now ended up in New Jersey, wanting to be closer to New York and them but both preferring to live a bit more suburban. El ran a bakery while Mike continued to write on different projects. It always tickled Nancy to think about customers walking into the cute little bakery having no idea that the sweet woman behind the counter was a real life superhero.

El is waiting outside the diner when she arrives. She hugs her sister-in-law and apologizes for running slightly late. They head inside, get

a table and order. El tells her about her business in the city and asks about her day.

"How is Emily?"

"She's great," Nancy smiles just thinking about her daughter who's soon turning four years old. "Though we had a bit of a situation last week."

"Oh?"

"They were doing some arts and crafts at daycare and Emily got hold of the glitter can and screwed the top off. She showered herself in it. And Luis. Turns out that stuff is *hard* to get off. So we had a sparkling daughter for the week," she snickers just thinking about it. They of course tried to teach Emily the lesson that she shouldn't do that and obey her teachers but damnit it was pretty funny too, even though they still found glitter in every nook and cranny of the apartment even after Jonathan had basically done a spring cleaning three times over while she bathed and washed Emily thoroughly so many times not only her fingers turned pruny but her daughter as well.

El laughs at the story. They chit-chat about this and that for a while before El suddenly turns a bit more serious.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, anything."

"How... is it? Being a mom."

"Oh," she looks at El who seems to be waiting for her answer with great interest. "It's great. I mean, it's kind of hard to describe. It's the best thing we've ever done, me and Jonathan. Having Emily. Just every day it's something new, a new adventure," she starts. El continues to look at her like she's hanging on every word so she expands her answer. "And what they say is true, you do get this whole new perspective on things. Like the most important thing used to be me and Jonathan. And, that doesn't change at all, how much you care about each other, if anything you care even more, if that was even possible. But you think about Emily first of all, for

everything. She's the number one most important thing in the whole world. It's that love that is just... completely unconditional and protective."

El nods slowly, seemingly taking every word in.

"What did you think before you had her?"

"Oh, about motherhood?"

"Yes."

"Um... well I didn't really think about it. Like, for real. I mean I thought about Jonathan and me having kids but only in the abstract, like a fantasy, something years in the future. Uh... well I don't know if we told you guys but to be honest we didn't really plan it."

"You didn't?"

"No."

"But you are awesome with plans?!" El questions.

"Thanks," she chuckles. "But yeah uh... well, we didn't plan on having Emily when we did. Not that we regret it, at all. She's the best thing that will ever happen to us. But at first I was scared."

"You, scared?" El asks in disbelief, which pleases her.

"Yes. Because we hadn't planned it, hadn't talked about it. I was scared of what it would mean for the future, our future. And could I be a good mom? Like, I already knew Jonathan would be the greatest dad in the world, I mean it was obvious. But me..."

"But... you're great at everything?" El continues to look at her in disbelief.

"Hah, not true. I can't cook, for starters."

"True. But everything else."

She laughs and rolls her eyes at El, the professional baker and cook,

stating it so matter-of-factly.

"I didn't think I'd be a good mom. And then there was all the other stuff too. Like, could we raise a kid in the city? Would I have to quit my job? And just the cost of raising a child..."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Honestly, Jonathan. He was so steady. Like he always is. He assured me I wouldn't have to quit my job, that we could do this our own way, that we wouldn't end up like my parents. And he convinced me I'd be a good mom. He was so sure of it. And we have a 'no bullshit' rule with each other, since high school, so he had to be telling the truth."

"Yes, truth. You are an amazing mom."

"Thanks. And then..."

"Then...?"

"I remember the first ultrasound, when we first saw Emily. When she was as big as an actual peanut," she smirks a little, that's where her favorite pet name for Emily came from. "And it just hit me, really hit me for real that this was our baby. Like, we did this, we made her, together. Me and Jonathan. And the thought of bringing something into the world that we created together... that's what really totally sold me on it."

"Cool," El says and nods slowly.

"Why do you ask? Are you and Mike thinking about...?"

"No! No, well I mean... not really, just I've been thinking, a little. I don't know. I don't think I could be a-"

"You'd be a great mom, El," she interrupts.

"I don-"

"You'd. Be. A. Great. Mom," she says with more finality, reaching out and taking one of El's hands, giving it a squeeze.

"You really think so?"

"I know so. You're smart, loving, caring and responsible. You're great with Emily, she loves you so much. Anytime you babysit she just talks about auntie Ellie for the whole day after."

El smiles at that.

"Plus, you can cook, unlike me. And your kid would be the safest kid in the world, considering," she continues.

El smiles at that too but then turns serious again.

"But I don't... what if my... what if it affects the baby, my... things..."

"Oh. I don't think it will," she says and squeezes El's hand again. "And if it did somehow I bet it'd be in a good way, not anything bad, for the baby. Because there's nothing wrong with you El. Nothing, so there's nothing bad you could pass on."

El looks at her and gives a slight nod again.

"Seriously, nothing."

"Okay."

"Do you want to be a mom?"

"I think so. But-"

"Then you should be one. Hey, you'd be such an awesome mom that even Mike couldn't screw up the kid," she jokes.

"Mike would be a great dad," El says firmly.

"I know, he really would actually. But it'd be up to you to make sure your kid is cool, don't fight me on that," she smirks. El rolls her eyes. "Seriously, if you want to have a kid, you should talk to Mike about it. And you should do it because you would be awesome parents."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Anytime."

Well, when she had made her mind up El worked fast, apparently. And Mike didn't seem to need much convincing. It's just a bit over a year later that they welcome Anne Joyce Wheeler into the world. El told her she first thought of the name because of Anne of Green Gables, but what sealed the deal was Karen giving El the same book of baby names she had once given her and Jonathan, and El in it finding out that the name Nancy was originally a nickname for Anne. She felt incredibly touched by that. To say nothing of how Joyce felt.

But perhaps no one was as excited about Anne's birth as Emily. The soon to be five year old was amazed at the prospect of having a little cousin and promised to teach her all she knew. Jonathan must've taken a hundred photos of when the cousins first met. Mike and El went on to have another child two years after Anne, a baby boy they named Benjamin Will Wheeler. El explained that the first name was in honor of a nice man. Will cried when he heard the middle name.

9. The Trial of the Century

It was nice being back in Hawkins for the holidays, seeing everyone. It was nice to have a little reprieve from the bustling of the city and the stress of everyday life. Though she loved their life in New York and knew she'd go crazy if she stayed back home for too long, it was nice in smaller portions. Both their families was also so eager to see Emily that between her mom, his mom and Emily's aunts and uncles they barely had to lift a finger. Which gave her time to sit down on the couch in her parents living room with a book for some peace and quiet even though it was a pretty full house for the day, not just them and their families but also their little brother's old friends were all there too, currently off somewhere playing with Emily.

"Mooommy!"

Well, there she is. The five year old comes running into the room with Hopper the bunny in one hand and the other around Mike's wrist, tugging her exasperated uncle along. The Sheriff's star that the real life Hopper had given her shone on her chest.

"Yes honey?" She smiles at her daughter and smirks at her little brother.

"Uncle Mike is arrested, you guard him so he don't escape!"

"Oh, sure honey. I mean, Chief. What did he do?"

"He stole my ball!"

She gasps dramatically. Mike rolls his eyes.

"A most serious crime! Did he work alone or was it a whole band of thieves?" She asks.

"We are investigating!" Emily explains, holding up her bunny. "Hopper is my de-pu-ty," she sounds out the word that the other Hopper aka Bunny Grandpa must've taught her. She's insanely proud over her daughter who definitely is the smartest kid in the world, no contest.

"That's great, well continue your investigation, I'll guard the prisoner!"

Emily runs off again. Mike starts to walk towards the kitchen.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Getting a snack?"

"You're in prison. You can't move."

"Come on, Nancy."

"That's Warden to you, maggot. Sit down."

She nails Mike with a look while trying to keep her face serious. He sighs and sits down on the couch.

"Wha-" He starts but she interrupts him.

"Ssch, no talking in prison," she says and turns a page.

Emily soon returns, having made further arrests. Dustin, Lucas and Max are deposited in her prison before Chief Emily and her trusty deputy run into the kitchen to inform the others of her arrests.

"Hey why are they allowed to talk?" Mike complains when she does nothing to stop Dustin, Lucas and Max from chatting.

"Hey! They're in a different cell block than you, you're in the maximum security wing."

"Nancy for-"

"Hey! Warden. Keep pushing it and you'll end up in solitary."

The others snicker at Mike's exasperation and she smirks. Emily comes running in again with her father, aunts and other uncle in tow and her grandparents watching amused from the doorway.

"Chief, what did they do?" She asks and gestures at Dustin, Lucas and Max.

"They were acting susp-suspicious."

"I see. You know, when someone is arrested for a crime they're usually put on trial," she reminds Emily who lights up at that.

"Yes! Trial!"

"I am willing to testify against Mike in exchange for freedom!" Dustin quickly cuts in.

"Us too!" Lucas and Max adds.

"Traitors," Mike mutters.

She lays claim to be the judge right away. Jonathan gets to be prosecutor. Will volunteers to be Mike's legal counsel. She's about to assign all the grandparents roles as jurors when she realizes she needs a bailiff.

"It would be my pleasure," Hopper slash Bunny Grandpa says and strides over to Mike and promptly takes out handcuffs.

"Hey!" Mike protests as his father-in-law a little bit too gleefully cuffs his hands behind his back just for a child's game.

"Nice touch, bailiff," she notes before calling the courtroom to order, using one of her shoes as a gavel.

"Would the accused rise?" She demands. Mike rolls his eyes at her while the bailiff pulls him up to a standing position.

"Michael Theodore Wheeler, you stand accused of grand larceny and possession of stolen goods, how do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Try again."

"Not guilty... Your Honor."

"That's better. Please be seated. Prosecuting attorney would you like to call your first witness?"

"Yes Your Honor," Jonathan stands up. "And might I add that Your Honor looks lovely today."

"You may, thank you," she smiles.

"Hardly seems professional..." Mike mutters under his breath so she bangs her shoe again.

"The prosecution calls Chief of Police Emily Byers to the stand," Jonathan says and smiles at Emily who giddily gets up and runs over to sit down on the other part of the couch which serves as the witness stand.

"Chief Emily do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

"I do!" Emily giggles.

"Good afternoon Chief. Would you please tell the jury about the crime that was committed earlier today?" Jonathan begins.

"Yes! We were playing in the basement and my red ball disappeared and Uncle Mike said he didn't know where it was but I knew he was lying because mommy told me how Uncle Mike looks when he lies and he looked like that. So I put on my star badge so I was police chief so I could make him get me the ball back but he lied again so I had to arrest him!"

"Oh my. Your Honor, would it be possible to add lying to a police officer to the charges this late?"

"Certainly. That is a grand felony too. This doesn't bode well for you, Michael."

"Aren't you supposed to be impartial until you hear all the facts?"

"Quiet or I'll hold you in contempt of court."

"Chief Emily, would you mind presenting your evidence to the court, have the stolen property in question been recovered?"

"Yes! I found it on the shelf behind his boring toys!"

"I see. What did he say when you made the arrest?"

"He said he was innocent but I think he lied!"

"Were there any witnesses? Who else was in the basement?"

"Uncle Dusty, Uncle Lucas and Aunt Max."

"I understand they were arrested as well?"

"Yes! Because they said they didn't see anything but my deputy says they did."

"Interesting. Most interesting. Thank you for your testimony Chief, and thanks for keeping our town safe."

Jonathan calls in order, Dustin, Lucas and Max to the stand who all happily give up Mike, confirming that he took the red ball.

"Your honor, I would now like to call a character witness. Holly Wheeler, please take the stand."

Her teenage sister drops down on the couch with a smirk.

"Holly, what is your relation to the accused?"

"He's my brother."

"You have known him your whole life?"

"Yes."

"How would you describe his character?"

"Shifty, at best."

"Hey!" Mike protests. She calls the room to order again.

"Have you ever witnessed him doing something... immoral?"

"One time he stole cookies mom helped me make for the bake sale."

"I didn't take that many, just a few!" Mike protests again. She bangs

her shoe again.

"Another time he cheated when we played Monopoly."

"Do you think him capable of committing the heinous crimes he stands accused of here today?"

"There's no doubt in my mind, he's capable."

"That will be all, thank you for your testimony."

"Any further witnesses, please?" She intones, making Jonathan blush and Mike groan.

"One, Your Honor. Calling Deputy Hopper to the stand."

Emily comes over and places her bunny on the couch before sitting down on the floor again, watching with great interest.

She has to bite her cheek from laughing when Jonathan starts pacing back and forth, talking both to and for the stuffed animal.

"Deputy Hopper, thank you for coming. You were present at the arrests today. Did you see who stole the red ball? You did? And do you see that person in this courtroom now? You do? Would you point to him, please."

She takes that as a cue and reaches out for the bunny, dramatically pointing one of its paws right at Mike. The jury and other witnesses gasp.

"No further questions, your honor."

Will, who's barely defended Mike so far now calls El as his character witness.

"What is your relation to the accused?"

"I'm his wife."

"You would characterize him as a good man of sound judgement?"

"Objection, Your Honor!" Jonathan pipes in. "Leading question."

"Sustained," she bangs her shoe. "Get it together, Byers," she nails Will with a look while trying to keep her face even.

"Fine. Do you think he is a good man?"

"Yes."

"I would remind you that you are under oath," she mutters to El who sticks her tongue out at her. Mike rolls his eyes.

"Does he possess sound judgement?" Will continues.

"Um..." El hesitates.

"El!" Mike calls out.

"... most of the time," El finishes.

"Hey!"

"Order! Order!" She calls and bangs her shoe. She's really getting into that.

"Do you think he is capable of such crimes as he stands accused of here today?"

"Um... yes."

"El!" Mike protests.

"Sorry Honey, but oath!" El defends herself.

"I've never felt more betrayed," Mike mutters.

After El it's time for Mike to take the stand. Jonathan begins his cross-examination.

"Mr. Wheeler, where were you at 2:45 this afternoon?"

"In the basement."

"Were you alone in the basement?"

"No, Dustin, Lucas and Max were there along with the little demon you've raised."

"I'm adding slander to the charges," she mutters.

"What were you doing there?"

"Playing with your little angel made of sunshine and rainbows," Mike replies dryly.

"Sarcasm directed against the prosecution is a felony, Mister," she notes.

"It was going well?"

"Yes."

"But then things took a turn, didn't it?"

Mike shrugs.

"Mr. Wheeler, you did well in school?"

"Yes."

"In most subjects?"

"I guess."

"But not all, did you?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Never liked gym much, did you, Mike?"

"No, did you?"

"I'm not the one on trial here. You don't like sports?"

"No."

"Would you go so far as to say you hate sports?"

"Yes, I hate sports."

"Is that why you did it? Is that why you stole the red ball and hid it behind your boring toys?"

"I didn't hide it behind boring toys I hid it behind my super-awesome X-Men figur- oh."

Mike cuts himself off as he realizes he just gave himself away. Jonathan smirks, pleased with himself.

"Yes I did it! It was a crime of opportunity! And I would've gotten away with it if it weren't for that meddling detective!" Mike calls out a confession. Emily giggles with glee.

"No further questions, Your Honor."

"Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how do you find the accused?"

"Guilty, your honor," is the unanimous answer.

"I agree. Please rise for sentencing," she demands and Mike stands up again. "Michael Theodore Wheeler, you are accused of the crimes of grand larceny, possession of stolen goods, lying to a police officer, slander and being snarky in a court of law. You have confessed to the theft and the jury finds you guilty on all four charges. I hereby sentence you to 500 hours of community service, to be served as the playmate of Ms. Emily Byers doing whatever she says and playing whatever she wants for however long she wants. You will also lose your dessert privileges for a day."

She bangs her shoe, confirming the sentence.

"Yay!" Emily celebrates and everyone but Mike applauds the sentence.

After dinner when it's time for dessert. Mike tries to lay claim to a piece but El, discreetly, moves it away from him in her own way.

"You're not allowed," she says.

Mike huffs. As Judge, she lays claim to his piece instead.

"Your penalty is my commission."

Jonathan then hands over her own piece too.

"Here you go, Your Honor," he says and kisses her cheek.

"Thank you, proseCUTEor."

"You guys are gross," Mike mutters.

"You called mommy and daddy gross, that's a crime! You're under arrest again!" Emily calls out.

"Another 500 hours of playtime!" She quickly doles out the sentence right at the table while sharing her dessert with her daughter.

"Talk about a fair trial," Mike mutters again. She raises an eyebrow at him, daring him.

"As your legal counsel, I would advise you to stop talking," Will says.

"Yeah you sure were a big help earlier..."

"Yeah, about that. My legal fee is a copy of Uncanny X-Men #94..."

"What?! No way!"

"Judge, this criminal refuses to pay his legal fees."

"Another 500 hours! And the good lawyer gets TWO comics of his choosing."

"I hate you."

Emily has had Hopper the bunny in her lap as usual, but now places him on the table in front of Mike.

"Massage," she commands.

"What?"

"Hopper needs a massage."

Mike groans and gets to work massaging the stuffed animal while everyone snickers.

"For how long?"

"As long as Hopper wants!"

Mike stops after about a minute.

"I think he said that was enough," he tries.

"No he didn't!" Emily informs him.

Another groan, and Mike starts again. She thinks her little brother may have definitively learned that crime does not pay.

10. Sick

"You're sick."

Okay, Nancy is the smartest person in the world. She's kind of always right. Almost. But for once, she is wrong. So he tells her so.

"No I'm not."

Sick? Him? No, he doesn't get sick. He's never sick.

"Yes you are."

Uh oh. Nancy is also the most stubborn person in the world. And she's using her "no bullshit" voice.

"Yes you are sick, Daddy!"

Correction, Nancy is the second-most stubborn person in the world. Their daughter is the most stubborn person in the world. Emily is four years old and becoming more and more like Nancy every day which is awesome. Nancy and his mom insists she's taking after him too.

"I'm not sick I'm just-"

He's cut off by his own body betraying him by sending him into a sneeze attack.

"Bless you," Nancy tells him when it's over. She looks at him with sympathetic but also determined eyes.

"Bless you, Daddy!" Emily repeats.

"Thank you," he says, dejected. Because damnit now they won't let it go. And he's *not* sick. Just a little bit under the weather but nothing he can't manage, it's just about powering through.

"You're sick. No more fussing. You're sick and need to relax," Nancy continues, determined.

"Yeah, we'll take care of you, Daddy!" Emily adds and grabs a hold of his hand and starts leading him to the couch. He can do nothing but follow, of course. Nancy smirks and puts a hand on his back to push him on. He's told to take his shoes off and lie down. His meek protests are ruined by a coughing fit sealing his fate.

"Don't worry, Daddy, I'm going to take care of you just like you take care of me! Hang on," Emily announces before running off to her room.

"Why did you go into work today? You felt off this morning," Nancy questions.

"Thought it'd pass, this will too Nance I'm not-" He starts but is interrupted by Nancy placing a hand on his forehead.

"You're burning," she says matter-of-factly.

"...with my love for you?" He tries. It gets a guffaw in return.

"Hah. I'm sure. But also body temperature wise," she smirks. "You must've caught it from Emily."

"I suppose."

"You better not give it to me," she teases.

"I'll try."

Emily comes running back into the room clutching a blanket she throws over him.

"There you go, Daddy!" She looks at Nancy for a second. "Mommy, keep an eye on him I'll be right back!" She says before darting out of the room again.

"Will do, Sweetheart!" Nancy smiles and calls after her. She turns to him again. "You mister, are resting. You. Are. Sick. You're always taking care of us. You need to relax and let us take care of you now."

"Okay, fine, I'll rest for a bit but then I'll get to-"

"No no no, no 'then'. You just rest. Don't worry about later. Rest."

"Fine."

Emily comes bounding into the room again, clutching Hopper the bunny.

"Here Daddy, Hopper always makes me feel better and he's great company!" She tells him and puts her precious stuffed animal under the blanket by his neck.

"Sure is. Thanks, Peanut."

Nancy momentarily disappears and returns with a glass of water, a more comfortable pillow than the one on the couch, and a thermometer she puts in his mouth.

"102," she reads off of it. "Definitely no moving about for you. Stay put."

"Fine."

He wakes up a bit groggily. Last thing he remembers is Emily singing nursery rhymes to him. Looking at the clock on the wall he surmises he's been asleep for a few hours. Looking around the room he spots Emily kneeling by the coffee table, drawing. And she sees him.

"Daddy's up!" She calls out and Nancy immediately walks out of their bedroom where he guesses she's taken the opportunity to finish up some work.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he answers. She just looks at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, a bit better. Not as hot," he expands his answer.

"Hm," she steps forward and feels his forehead again. "You're not as warm yes. Are you cold?"

"I don't know, maybe-" he doesn't get to finish his sentence before

Emily is running to get another blanket for him.

"Thanks."

"Are you hungry?" Nancy asks next.

"A little."

"I'll make some soup," she tells him and goes to the kitchen. He can hear her rummaging around in the kitchen and muttering as she opens and closes doors to the pantry and fridge. She swiftly returns to the living room.

"Okay wow we did not have ingredients for that. Change of plans: I'll run down the street and get you some nice chicken soup. You stay put. Emi, take care of daddy, don't let him get up. He needs to rest."

"Sure thing Mommy!" Emily answers. Nancy kisses the top of her head before heading out the door.

"Are you still cold Daddy? Do you need another blanket?"

"No thanks Sweetie, I'm good."

"Okay."

His daughter then seems to be in deep thought for a while.

"What are you thinking about Peanut?" He asks.

"I'm trying to remember. What you do when I'm sick. I got you blankets and Hopper. Mommy got you water and pillow and the stick to see if you were warm. And she's getting food now."

"Yes you did, it was very nice of you."

"Feels like... forgetting something. Blankets, Hopper, water, pillow, stick, food."

"Think that's it. You guys take great care of me."

"Hm..." Emily continues to think intently. Then a lightbulb seems to go off for her. "Ooh, of course! Cuddles!" She exclaims excitedly and

promptly climbs up the couch and him, hugging him. He grins and wraps his arms around her and she snuggles in close. "You and Mommy always give me extra cuddles when I'm sick and you said it's because you need it when your sick! Are you feeling better Daddy?"

"Much," he smiles wide.

Soon they hear Nancy's key in the lock as she returns.

"Hey, so I got- awww," she starts and interrupts herself, cooing when she sees him and Emily snuggled up on the couch.

"He needs cuddles, Mommy, he's sick!" Emily informs her.

"Of course, good job Sweetie!" Nancy answers, smiling widely as she sheds her coat and walks over to them with three soup containers in her hands. "Anyway, I got us all some soup since I was there, can't be bothered in the kitchen today."

"Thanks," he tells her.

They sit on the couch all three of them huddled together and eat their soup while cartoons roll on the TV. Okay, he might be a little sick. But it won't last for long with great caregivers like this.

11. Nights like these

Nancy's working late tonight, being on the tails of a major story about corruption in the mayor's office she's been pulling a lot of late nights recently getting to the bottom of it. She called earlier and said she'd be home around ten, so she should be here soon. He put Emily to bed an hour ago and is content to sit and read on the living room sofa, enjoying the silence. He's contemplating moving to the comforts of the bedroom soon and continuing on with *High Fidelity* in there, when he's interrupted by the pitter-patter of familiar light footsteps and a small shaky voice.

"D-d-daddy I h-had a n-nightmare..."

The seven year old just stepped into the room, clutching her dear Hopper the Bunny to her chest. Her cheeks are wet from tears and she's trembling as she looks up at him with worried eyes. His heart breaks seeing his daughter like this. He quickly gets up and hurries over to her, crouching down and wrapping her up in a big hug. She wraps her little arms around his neck and buries her face in his chest.

"Aw, sweetheart. It's okay. I've got you. I've got you. It's alright, it was just a dream," he soothes, pressing a kiss to her hair.

"I-it was h-ho-horrible," she gets out, still sniffling.

"It's okay, it's over now. I'm here. It was just a dream."

"C-can I s-sleep in your bed?"

"Of course sweetie. Lets go get tucked in now. Mommy will be home soon anyway and she might need the extra snuggles after her long day."

He picks Emily up and carries her with him into the bedroom. They settle under the covers, he half sits up against the backboard and wraps an arm around Emily while she cuddles into his side.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" He tries. "It gets less scary when you tell it to someone," he adds when she doesn't react.

"I d-dreamt a bad man came and hurt you and mommy and I had to run away but he ran after me..."

"Oh sweetheart-" he starts.

"Like in the paper," she interrupts.

This addition explains it. Oh shit. Emily loves to read. She's so smart. And of course she's so curious about Nancy's job, just like she's curious about his job. So just like he shows his photos to her, Nancy and him read the New York Times with her in the mornings. Of course avoiding and trying to hide any stories that's much too adult, instead focusing on the stories which has Nancy's name attached to them, since those are the most fascinating for Emily of course, and since Nancy can explain them in a way Emily understands. Then they let her read all the fluffier pieces or at least neutral ones, explaining any words and stuff Emily don't understand as they go along. This time there was an item about a horrible home invasion, which they of course took precaution to make sure Emily didn't see, Nancy knowing what page it appeared on and making sure to distract Emily at that point while he turned to the next page before she could see it. They carried on without a hitch, but Emily must've gone back to the paper by herself later without him noticing. She doesn't usually though.

"I opened it after school to look for that big word in mommy's story about the mayor. Association. I wanted to learn how to spell it. But I found this other story I didn't remember about..."

"Oh sweetheart," he repeats. "You don't have to worry about that. That won't happen to us. I promise you. I'm safe, and mommy's safe and you are super safe, you know why?"

"Why?"

"Well I'm safe because mommy is the strongest in the world, she can take on anyone! She'd never let a bad guy come close to me, she would take them down! They wouldn't stand a chance. And I would never ever let anyone come close to mommy. And you are super safe because we both would never ever let anything ever happen to you, ever. No baddie would ever even try it because it'd be useless to even try! I promise."

"Promise?"

"Yep, and remember you can't break a promise, so."

"Right."

"Can we make another promise? You and me."

"What?"

"That we only read the paper together. It's great that you read so much, Peanut, and it's fun to look up words. But me and mommy would like it if you just read the paper with us there, because there is this scary stuff in it sometimes, stuff that can be scary to read by yourself if we're not there to explain it because not everything is... appropriate for kids to read, even when you're super good at reading like you are. We can always read the paper for however long you want but can we do it together?"

"Okay daddy. I promise."

"Good. Think you can go to sleep again?"

"I don't know... it's still scary... can you tell a story daddy?"

"Sure, sweetheart. What kind of story?"

"A nice story. And not made up... can you tell me how you met mommy?"

"Of course, that's a nice story. You comfy?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Well. First day I met your mother was the first day of school. You remember how you felt the first day of school?"

"Yes. It was scary when you and mommy left but then I saw Luis and it was less scary then because it's less scary in the new place when you know someone there."

"Exactly, it's always less scary when you're not alone. But I didn't

know anyone at all so when my mom left I thought it was super scary, in this place I had never been with all these people there I didn't know and didn't know how to talk to. I raised my hand and said yes when they called my name but other than that I didn't say anything. I saw your mommy though, she raised her hand on every question teacher had and was always right because she's always been super smart. At recess I didn't know what to do, all the boys was running around and pushing each other and playing football but I didn't like football and pushing each other around didn't look fun so I hid on the edge of the schoolyard to keep out of trouble. All the girls were playing hopscotch or jumping rope and that seemed more fun but I was too shy to go over to them. Then I saw your mommy, she was sitting with her friend Barb playing patty cakes. And then she saw me and she walked over and said hello. And I said hello back and then she asked if I wanted to play with them. And I said I didn't know how to because I'd never played patty cakes before. And she said it was real easy, she'd show me. And she did. It was fun. So then I wasn't alone on recess anymore."

"She plays patty cakes with me too!"

"I know."

"She's really good at it. We showed Luis how to play too. You don't play patty cakes with mommy anymore though?"

"No, maybe we should start again."

"So that's when you met mommy."

"Yes."

"Did you love her?"

"Oh, already then? Um... I don't know."

"When did you know you love mommy?"

"Hm... that's a longer story."

"Please tell it."

"Hm... okay but it's a long one, so settle in. Are you comfy?"

"Yes!" Emily answers, burrowing deeper into the blankets and his side.

"Super comfy?"

"Yes!"

"Okay," he starts, taking a small pause as he works out which bits of the story to leave out as to make it child appropriate. "So... when we were 16 and Uncle Will was 12, Uncle Will went missing."

"What? He did?" Emily asks. He can hear the front door open and Nancy quietly stepping inside, but Emily doesn't notice, too riveted by the story.

"Yes," he listens to how Nancy puts down her purse and takes off her coat in the hall. Hears her walk over to Emily's room and then the living room. Her footsteps near the bedroom softly. He continues the story as Emily is antsy for the continuation. "He just disappeared and me and my mom couldn't find him, and not the police either. And we looked everywhere. And mommy, she helped me look. See my mom and Hop were looking everywhere together, and mommy then helped me look. We hadn't talked a lot then, for a couple of years... I mean, we saw each other at school and when I went to her house to pick up Uncle Will since he and Uncle Mike were best friends, and we'd talk then but we didn't spend much time together... until that week Will went missing. Together we came up with a plan to find Will."

Nancy's footsteps have stopped outside.

"You found him?" Emily prompts.

"Yes, yes we found him. And that week... that's when I fell in love with her, with mommy. But I'm not sure I knew it then... it was... complicated. I think I realized it later... over time. She gave me a camera for Christmas that year, we'd never exchanged gifts before... and then for a year we were... well we were not together but..."

"You weren't?"

"No... but I realized more and more that I loved her... then the next fall... we took a trip together. An important trip. And that's when we uh... got together. Because I was in love with mommy and she had been in love with me, we just didn't... uh... realize it before. And when we got home Will was sick... um, really sick. And mommy was there with me the whole time, by my side helping me. And she saved Uncle Will's life. If I didn't know already that's when I for sure knew... that I loved her. And since then we've always been together, through everything."

"What do you love most about mommy?" Emily yawns.

"Oh wow... everything. How strong she is, and brave, and smart and kind and funny... everything. You know, I just love her more and more. Same with you! I remember the day you were born, it felt like my heart grew bigger because I thought I couldn't possibly love mommy more than I already did but we got you and it made me love her even more and as soon as you were here, soon as we held you I knew my heart just got bigger to make room for all the love because now it was you *and* mommy. And I love you both infinitely. You know what infinitely means right?"

"Forever?"

"Yes, forever and ever, more than anything, more than you can put into words. That's how much I love you."

"That's how much I love you and mommy," Emily sleepily replies.

"I know sweetie. And how much mommy loves you."

Emily has closed her eyes. He sits and watches as she slowly drifts off to sleep. When he thinks she's in a sufficiently deep sleep he carefully gets up, pulling the covers further over her and sneaking out of the bedroom.

Nancy's right on the other side of the door, leaning against the door frame. She wipes at her eyes when he comes out.

"What's wrong?" He immediately whispers. She throws her arms around him and buries her face in his chest.

"Nothing, I just really needed to hear that today," she mumbles into his chest. "I love you so much."

"I love you. Sure you're okay?" He asks, pressing a kiss to her hair.

"Just a long day."

"How did it go?"

"Good. I'm drained but... it got done. We're running it tomorrow."

"Awesome. I'm so proud of you. You're unstoppable."

"God I missed you guys," Nancy sighs against him.

"We missed you too. Are you hungry? I saved some leftovers in case-"

"Thanks I'm good, we ordered in food to the office. I just wanna go to bed."

He leads Nancy to the bathroom so they can both get ready for bed.

"How's Emily? Why is she in our bed?" Nancy asks when she's washed her makeup off.

"She had a nightmare," he informs her.

"Oh. What about?" She asks, concerned while handing him his toothbrush before taking her own and squeezing out toothpaste on both.

"Bad one uh... that story on the home invasion... after school she opened the paper again, she wanted to look up how you spelled association and saw that article..."

"Oh God."

"Yeah. It's okay, think I calmed her down. Told her we were all safe since you're a badass and she was super safe since we'd never let anything happen to her. And we made a promise to only read the paper together, so we always can explain it to her."

"Good."

"She wanted to sleep in bed with us. And she wanted me to tell her about how I met you. So I told her about the first day of school. Remember, you came up to me at recess?" He says after spitting in the sink.

"I remember. You were so shy and sweet," she says, following suit.

"Then we got onto the topic of when I knew I loved you so... I told her about that... uh, the censored version of course. Which you heard."

"Yes. You tell it so nice."

"Well, it's a nice story, despite everything."

"It is," she smiles and plants a soft, minty kiss on his lips.

They sneak into the bedroom so to not disturb Emily, but she stirs awake when they get in bed on either side of her.

"Hey Peanut," Nancy whispers and plants a kiss on her forehead.

"Mommy..."

"Mmhm. Go back to sleep," she continues while cuddling their daughter who instantly snuggles in close to Nancy. He wraps an arm around them both and pulls them in close. All cuddled up like this he's content to listen to their daughter's soft breathing as she slowly drifts off again, to be followed shortly by Nancy. Yes, he'd never ever let anything happen to them. He's eager to get to sleep himself because he can't wait for the morning. For another day with them. But nights like these are pretty okay too, he thinks as Nancy in her sleep cuddles both herself and Emily further into him.

12. The comfiest pillow in the world

Four days old...

Emily is a clingy but sleepy baby. They come to that conclusion quickly. Both their mothers tell them how lucky they are she's a sleepy baby as opposed to a cryer for example. According to her mom, Nancy was the latter, and she herself recalls Holly wailing in the night too. Joyce says Jonathan and Will both were similar to Emily. "Sweet babies, but God you were so cuddly! As long as I held you you wouldn't cry but there was a period where you'd cry soon as I put you down!". That's sort of how it is with Emily at this early stage. She doesn't cry when she's held, but try and set her down once she's fallen asleep and she'll instantly wake up crying, craving bodily contact. They hope Joyce is right that it's just a phase that will pass, because though Emily is the most amazing, snuggly, cuddly, precious, awesomest thing ever, she's not sure she'll be able to deal with having to hold her *all* the time.

Because it's still early, only their second day home from the hospital. She's still drained from the ordeal of giving birth, she mostly sits or lies with Emily while Jonathan is running around waiting on her hand and foot. She swears it's like he's in multiple places at once sometimes, like when he's somehow cooking her food, giving her a back rub, doing laundry and changing Emily's diaper seemingly all at the same time. She felt kind of bad about just sitting on her butt while he's darting around at light speed fixing stuff, but when she told him this he stopped in his tracks, looked at her and then pointed to Emily.

"You gave birth to her and you keep her alive, you've done more than I will ever even come close to doing, ever."

Hard to argue with that when he sounds so sure.

She holds Emily most of the day. Emily eats and sleeps. That's basically it. Well, that and tiny life-changing moments like her eyes peering open and them for a second locking gazes before Emily nuzzles in closer and falls back asleep. At night they try again to place a sleeping Emily in the bassinet by their bed, but they soon give

up on it as it makes the girl bawl her eyes out. Emily stops crying soon as she picks her up again.

"You know, this is definitely your cuddle bug genes doing this," she notes.

"Oh yeah, because you're so cold and aloof," Jonathan josses her.

"Fair," she admits. Kind of has to admit considering she's pressed into his side as usual right now, it's second nature to her to be that close.

"I can take her," he then offers.

She nods and carefully hands Emily over. The baby whimpers a little at first but soon as she's resting against Jonathan's broad chest she stops. She then lets out a big cute yawn before nuzzling in close and soon falling back asleep.

"Mm, she's got the right idea," she notes and adjusts herself, laying down her head in the crook of Jonathan's neck. "Comfiest pillow in the world."

"Glad to be at your service," he chuckles.

"Don't roll over," she mumbles into his chest before following Emily into dreamland.

Six months...

"Seriously it was awesome, their sound is amazing and he sings about like... like everything, you know? Like it just hits you so hard," Will is beaming with excitement telling him all about a concert he went to with some friends from college last night. Some new band Jonathan's not sure he's heard of before, he's been kind of out of the loop music wise recently. Other stuff kind of took the forefront.

"Yeah, totally. That's awesome. What was their album called, again?" He asks while glancing at Emily who's on the playmat between him and Will, currently content to just lie on her tummy clutching her dear Hopper the Bunny, that Will gave her as a newborn, in one fist while simply pounding the floor with the other while making

incoherent baby noises, peering up at him. He smiles down at her.

"Nevermind," Will tells him.

"What? No come on, I'm listening," he insists. He really is, Will shouldn't think he's not interested or blowing him off just because he's looking after the baby at the same time.

"No," Will snorts with laughter. "That's the album. It's called *Nevermind*. By Nirvana," he explains.

"Oh! Gotcha. Cool, I'll check that out."

"I have a tape with a few of theirs on it, here," Will fishes a mix tape out of his pocket and hands it over. "You gotta hear *Come As You Are*. It's incredible."

"Cool," he nods. Emily, intrigued by the new item in her line of sight reaches out for the tape in his hand.

"Awesome, she's already into grunge. I knew you'd make a cool kid," Will grins.

"She's the coolest yeah," he agrees.

"She actually almost looks like their album cover, kind of. But all babies look the same so. Well, except she doesn't have the little wee-wee of course."

"Er, what?"

"Oh, on the album cover there's a baby boy swimming after a dollar bill."

"Huh. 'Wee-wee'?" He smirks.

"Well I don't know, felt weird to say d-i-c-k or p-e-n-i-s about a baby's you-know-what, especially in front of a baby," Will blushes.

"Right," he chuckles.

Emily's attention has turned to Will. She started crawling recently

and excited with her newfound ability that she's rapidly getting better at, she hurriedly turns around and crawls over to her uncle and tries to climb into his lap. That proves to be a big of a challenge though, but Emily happily babbles when Will instead picks her up and plays with her. He's happy to watch the two of them. That Will would be the best uncle in the world was as obvious to him as the fact that Nancy would be the best mom ever.

"Hey watch her for a minute will you, I'll get the milk," he excuses himself and gets up to go to the kitchen.

"So how's Nancy doing?" Will asks him while he feeds Emily.

"Good, she's good. She's happy to be back at work but still misses Emily for those hours. But you know, that's how it is. She'd miss work otherwise."

"Right, yeah. Plus work is just so many hours out of the day, she can still be with her, right?"

"Right. And she can work from home on Fridays, mostly, which is good for her. But I think she's still adjusting, you know after being home with her for six months. You get really used to it and she's always on your mind."

"Sure. You guys are really nailing this whole thing, by the way. I mean, we all knew you would but it's still cool to see."

"Thanks. It's pretty easy though, with Nancy on my team. She can do anything so I just try to do all I can."

"Well, you're not too bad either."

"I guess. But to be fair Emily doesn't really do much so it's easy."

"Mainly eating, it seems like?" Will smirks.

The girl in question just at that moment decides she's done eating, turning her head and pushing the bottle away.

"Yeah," he smiles as he holds Emily up to his shoulder and pats her back. "And burping," he continues and soon is granted with Emily

doing just that.

Emily next lets out a comically large yawn, then nuzzles into his shirt and instantly falls asleep.

"And sleeping," Will chuckles at the speed of which she went between the two modes.

"Yes. And pooping, don't forget about pooping," he adds and carefully adjusts Emily so he can take a quick sniff. "Not yet, so there's something to look forward to."

"Exciting times," Will rolls his eyes and smiles.

Four years old...

Okay. Dishes — done. Cleanup in the kitchen — done. Cleanup in the living room — done. Cleanup in the hall — done. Cleanup in their bedroom — not tonight. Cleanup in Emily's room — await status report. Now entering prone position.

Emily turned four years old today. A monumental occasion of course, just like when she turned one, two and three. As per usual they invited Emily's aunts and uncles and grandparents, and her best friend Luis, who all showed up of course, El in advance with the cake she insisted on making just like previous birthdays. But this year the guest list expanded outside the usual suspects. The big happening in Emily's life between her third and fourth birthday was her starting preschool. She's loved it from the start, being a bit apprehensive at first but once Nancy convinced her it was the start of a big exciting adventure she'd go on with Luis at her side, she was game. Headstrong, creative and energetic she soon discovered the perks of going to a place which had fun new toys she didn't have at home and a bunch of new playmates. Emily invited them all to her party. Twenty kids who received nice handmade invitation cards Emily made with Nancy's help. It's all gone well, Emily's had a big smile on her face all day playing with her friends and family. But dear God, somehow hosting twenty sugar-high kids at their place and the cleanup has been almost more exhausting than all their run-ins with another dimension. The aftermath of the party slightly reminded him

of the states of destruction his old home in Hawkins was put in through the years.

He and Nancy cleaned the living room and hall together after saying goodbye to their last guests — his mother, stepfather and brother, whose offer to stay and help clean up they politely declined — while Emily played with the new toys she was gifted today. While he took care of the kitchen Nancy went to get Emily ready for bed.

And having finished up in there he's now allowed himself to fall back on the living room couch, lying from end to end stretching out and grabbing some rest. He smiles to himself as he can hear Emily and Nancy talking in about the day while brushing their teeth. Then their soft footsteps pattering out from the bathroom and towards the living room.

"Turning four is exhausting! I'm all tuckered out."

"Aw, you'll sleep well then Peanut, we'll just say goodnight to- well well looks like it tuckered daddy out too!"

He opens his eyes to find his wife smirking at him and his daughter with a smile on her lips and tired eyes. She clutches Hopper the bunny in her hand.

"Mm, well I certainly am all tuckered out. You and your friends really know how to party, Emi."

"Did you have fun daddy?"

"I did, did you?"

"Super fun!"

"That's good. Sometimes you have so much fun you get so tired. So we should go to sleep so we can wake up and have more fun tomorrow."

"Good idea!"

He gives Emily a goodnight kiss and hug. But then the girl doesn't turn away to go into her bedroom with Nancy like he expected,

instead she climbs up the couch, plopping herself down on top of him, laying down with her head on his chest. His arms immediately go around her to keep her steady of course. Nancy snickers.

"Sweetie, what are you doing?" He asks.

Emily's answer comes in the form of a large yawn. Says it all, really.

"Okay sweetie but we should sleep in beds not on top of daddy," Nancy tries, barely containing the chuckle in her voice.

Emily's already fallen asleep though.

"Wow she really goes lights out when she's comfy on you doesn't she," Nancy continues to snicker.

"Yeah," he whispers. It's not the first time she's fallen asleep on him or snuggled into him.

Sleeping on the couch the whole night doesn't sound appealing though so with Nancy's help he manages to get up without disturbing Emily and they head into their bedroom, all three of them. Nancy's as beat as he is and they end up in a big tangled heap, him sleeping on his back with Emily on his chest and Nancy on his arm.

Six years old...

"I'm going to stay up until midnight!"

"Well, you're welcome to try, Peanut."

"I will! Just you watch!"

There's five hours left of 1997 and their six year old is determined to stay awake for the fireworks going off at midnight. He has no problem with Emily taking on that challenge. She'll never make it. She's never made it past nine the previous years. He exchanges a knowing glance with Nancy who smirks at him. They're celebrating in the new year at home with his mom, Hopper, El and Mike, and Will and his boyfriend Adam. It's become a tradition for them all, since they first moved to New York really. In time for the clock to

strike twelve they'll go up to the roof of their apartment building from where they'll have a good view of the fireworks. Until then they're happy to be inside with each other's company, food and the moderate amount of booze they're comfortable having at a party with a six year old as well as El and Mike's baby girl Anne.

Emily makes it until almost 10 PM before she slumps against Nancy on the couch and starts snoozing away. Nancy smiles and presses a kiss to their daughter's hair before carefully adjusting her so she's laying down under a blanket.

"We'll wake her up for the fireworks," she tells him as they together with the others subtly moves the party into the kitchen and keeping it going at a lower volume.

1997, the year Emily started first grade. And the year he and Nancy both turned 30 and "officially got old" as Mike put it. He doesn't really feel old though, it's hard to feel that way when he's with Nancy and they're having just as much fun as they did a decade ago. It feels crazy how the years have passed. It feels like just yesterday they were skittering around each other until they finally just said fuck it and shared the damn bed in Murray's bunker. But it also feels like just yesterday they moved to New York, just yesterday Emily was born, just yesterday a lot of things. Time is weird in that way.

"Honey, wake up."

"Huh... what..." Emily mumbles in response as he rouses her from her sleep.

"It's almost midnight. 1998 is just around the corner."

"Nooo did I fall asleep?!"

"You did, honey."

"Rats."

"But you lasted longer than last year!"

"I'm tired..." Emily rubs her eyes.

"Come on, I'll carry you."

"Next year I'm going to be awake the whole time," Emily says with conviction as they're on the rooftop.

"I believe in you sweetie," Nancy smiles.

"I'm gonna stay up all night now at least!"

"I'm sure you will..."

"Ten!" Mike calls out, and they all join in counting down the last ten seconds of the year, none more loud than Emily.

"Happy new year!"

He's still holding Emily and on the stroke of midnight he and Nancy kisses either of their daughter's cheeks. She squeals with laughter while fireworks erupt above their heads. Emily is transfixed by them while he shares a quick kiss with Nancy.

By the time the last fireworks ebb out, Emily's already fallen back asleep against his chest.

Fifteen years old...

"America's Most Wanted?"

"Next."

"Law & Order SVU?"

"I've seen this one three times already."

"News?"

"I write the news, next."

"Some Disney cartoon... oh it's *Lady and the Tramp*."

"Hold it!"

"You want to watch *Lady and the Tramp*?"

"Hell yeah, considering the options."

"Fair."

Jonathan puts down the remote. She picks up both their wine glasses and hands his to him before nestling into his side, getting comfortable right in the spot that's been her favorite one to be in on earth for decades now. It's Saturday night and Emily is out, giving them privacy and time to cuddle up on the couch. Jonathan remembered to pick up wine but forgot to pick up a movie and having gone through all their dvd's they opted to flick through channels until finding something suitable enough. Which they found in ABC's Saturday Night Movie.

"Remember first time we watched this together?"

"Yes, there was a snowstorm so we couldn't go to the movies so we had to make due with what me and Will and mom had on tape."

"And we found this and you got inspired to make spaghetti later."

"Right."

"One of my favorite dates ever I think."

"I'm sure-"

He's interrupted by the front door suddenly swinging open and Emily coming in, alone.

"You're home early?" She calls out to the hall. Emily really is, it's not even 9:30, way too early for a teenager to return home from a date.

Emily doesn't answer at first but they can hear her breathing heavily.

"Emi? Are you okay?" She asks as they both stand up. They're on their way to the hall when Emily steps into the living room, wiping at her cheeks where tears fall freely.

"Brian broke up with me."

Oh. The first boyfriend. Since about a month back. And now the first heartbreak. It pains her so to see her daughter like this, all she wants to do is wrap her up in a big hug and shield her from everything bad in the world. So that's what she does. And Jonathan the same.

"Oh sweetheart, come here. I'm so sorry."

Emily just cries in their arms for awhile and they simply let her. Eventually she feels it appropriate to ask.

"What happened?"

"I-I d-don't know he just said he wasn't 'feeling it' anymore... w-what am I supposed to make out of that?"

"Ugh, I don't know sweetie that's such a shitty explanation... it's not even an explanation."

"I-I j-just don't get what... what changed? I d-didn't feel like anything changed I thought it was like before, I liked that... m-maybe I'm too slow... too boring..."

"Honey, no," Jonathan immediately protests.

"But it must be me... I d-don't know what to do with... stuff like this... what's expected... I thought we were having fun I didn't want to do... more. Than we were doing..." Emily mumbles, then hastily adds. "Just kissing! Is what I meant. Just kissing I don't want..."

"Peanut, relax. You didn't do anything wrong. Come here, let's sit down."

They lead Emily to the couch and sit down with Emily in the middle. They let Emily collect herself, anticipating that she has more to get off her chest first. As much as it pains her to see her daughter hurting, she's happy Emily feels comfortable coming to them to talk about it. Like they've told her all her life, she should always come to them with whatever problem she has and they will listen to her and try to help her. She thinks back to her own upbringing. It wasn't quite like that. She loves her mom but they were never... that close, or at least not as close as she feels to Emily. Growing up she didn't always feel like she could go to her mom. She vividly remembers the last

time she did, go to her with a big problem. Confiding in her about Barb's disappearance and all her worries about that. Her mom had tried to be supportive in her own way at first but then... the betrayal she felt when, after she told her mom all about her worries for Barb and what could've happened to her, her mom instead focused on the fact that she had gone to a party and hooked up with a guy, that that was what was important to her, that her princess had slept with some guy not that Barb was missing. She's never really gotten over that betrayal, after that it felt useless to go to her mom with her troubles. She'd handle it herself instead. With a lot of help from the guy who's right now got his arm protectively around both her and their daughter on the couch. And she promised herself she'd never do to Emily what her own mom did to her.

"I'm just... I don't know what people, what he... expects. Or wants. I thought we were just having fun going to the movies and hanging out and stuff and just uh... kissing. I didn't... don't... want to do more than that... kissing. Right now. But I know that... I mean Cindy told us in the locker room that she let Greg Morris feel her up like uh... a *lot* and people talk about going to second base or third or whatever and like some have been having sex since like 8th grade, ew, but I'm just... not ready... for that stuff... I thought Brian got that but I mean I know he wanted more because I kind of had to slow him down last week what if that's what... I mean everyone else is up for it I don't know why I'm such a-"

"Hey hey hey. You shouldn't do stuff you don't want to do. Never. Don't ever do stuff just because other people are doing them if you don't really want to. That's never the solution. We're so proud of you. You're so strong."

"No..."

"Yes you are, you have the strength to say something when you're uncomfortable and don't let people just have their way with you. That's really strong. You know... a lot of that stuff you mentioned it's just... okay all that stuff can for sure be fun, but only if both are ready for it and really want to do it. Sadly I think a lot of times people start doing stuff like that when they're too young because... well because boys... a lot of... *most*, boys take stuff for granted and maybe are pushy in a way that it's hard to say no. When someone is

being pushy, to say no like you did that takes strength and not everyone has that strength always, which no one can be blamed for, it's just bad that people are pushy... I'm not gonna be the type of mother who tells you to not do... stuff but I am glad you haven't done that stuff yet if you're not comfortable with it. Because it really is only fun if you really want to do it not when you just give in because someone nags you about it."

"And if he couldn't handle you saying you didn't want to do that stuff then he's an idiot."

"Dad..."

"He is. If he can't wait and doesn't like it when a girl says what she wants, he sucks."

"It's true Peanut, he really sucks if that's the reason."

"Okay but still it's... I don't know if it was that I just think maybe that was... but also just like... compared to other girls I mean I... if I don't put out like other girls... and then I look like this and I'm not cool I don't get how... what would people see in me... what did he even see-"

"People see a super cute beautiful girl! With a cute face and great hair and piercingly blue eyes-"

"Mom, you're my mom of course you're gonna say-"

"That you're the most beautiful girl in the world, because you are. Okay remember, family rule: No bullshit."

"But ugh I'm too short and I'm flat as a plank and my acne is..."

"Isn't noticeable. And you're not flat as a plank, nor too short. You're perfect."

"Yes. And what do you mean you're not cool? You're easily the coolest girl in your school."

"Dad, you don't know cool. Pretty sure my dad saying I'm the coolest just made me even less cool..."

"Hey now I know cool! Your mom was the coolest girl in town no doubt and you're so much like her!"

"Yeah right... I just... feel so stupid."

"You're not stupid. He's stupid. Boys are stupid."

"Well I'm just... I thought he liked me... I liked him... I think I liked him... it's... I hate this. I was so nervous I'd screw it up and I wasn't sure how I felt but then I started feeling better about it and then he just goes 'not feeling it'... I don't... I don't know..."

"Sweetie, were you having fun? With him."

"Yes... mostly, I mean. When I wasn't nervous or unsure of... stuff, it was fun."

"Well then... I know it hurts, it ending like this. Without him giving a good reason even. That really sucks. And I'm not gonna lie, it's gonna continue to suck for a bit... I wish I could say something that would just make it all better but I don't have those magic words sweetie. But I do know it's going to be okay."

"Right..."

"And I don't think you should have any regrets. Seriously, it's his loss not yours. It's not you who did anything wrong. You did what you wanted to do and didn't do what you didn't want to do. Hold onto that attitude sweetie, please, I'm begging you. Don't do stuff you don't want to do. If he can't handle that it's his loss."

"Yeah he'll be kicking himself soon enough. He'll go 'oh my god how could I let Emily Byers go? I'm such an idiot'," Jonathan fills in.

"Yeah right dad," Emily scoffs with the slightest hint of laughter in her tone. "And thanks mom I know I'm just... trying to be strong like you but-"

"You're already way stronger than me."

"No I'm not-"

"Yes you are. God you should've seen me at your age. So desperate to fit in, so unsure of who I was, what I wanted to do..."

"I don't know what I want to do or who I am or anything either!"

"Yeah but who does? My point is, you at least don't change who you are to fit in. You're just unapologetically you, which makes you the coolest. You got that from your dad, by the way. I love that about you and that's why your friends like you and that's why even the dork I married is right when he says you're the coolest girl in school."

Emily releases a soft chuckle at her calling Jonathan a dork.

"Why are you drinking wine and watching *Lady and the Tramp*?" Emily then asks as she readjusts herself further back into the cushions and for the first time really glancing up at the TV.

"Because adulthood is fun. And because your father forgot to go to Blockbuster."

"And because your mom got nostalgic."

"We watched this in the winter of '84 when we got snowed in and then he got inspired to make me spaghetti," she explains to Emily's questioning look. "It was sweet."

"Ugh, you're both dorks," Emily shakes her head.

"Thanks, you've said that before."

The classic scene where Lady and the Tramp share a string of spaghetti comes on.

"Please tell me you guys didn't do that," Emily sighs.

"Well..."

"It was your mother's idea."

"God please tell me I'm adopted."

"Sorry honey."

Her daughter's usual dry sarcasm is like music to her ears. Emily will be okay. They remain cuddled up together all three on the couch for the rest of the evening, lazily watching the rest of the movie and then other late-night programming. Eventually Emily falls asleep against Jonathan just like she always did when she was little. She gently brushes a hand through Emily's hair and thinks that through it all they somehow must've managed to do something right because they've raised this girl who's turned into the best person in the history of the world as far as she's concerned.